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ALL I COULD NEVER BE

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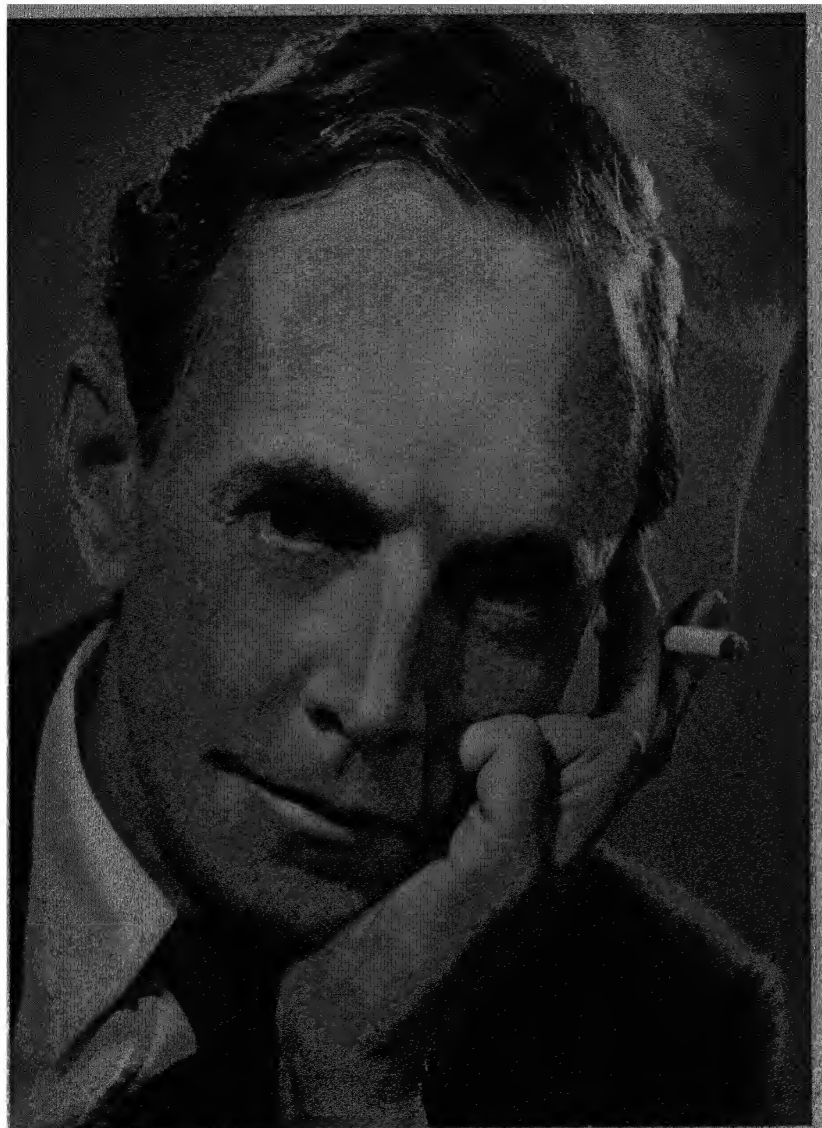
MEN DO NOT WEEP

VERDICT ON INDIA

THE TREE THAT SAT DOWN

THE STREAM THAT STOOD STILL





THE AUTHOR

# ALL I COULD NEVER BE

*Some Recollections by*

BEVERLEY NICHOLS



All I could never be  
All men ignored in me  
This was I worth to God  
Whose wheel the pitcher shaped.  
ROBERT BROWNING

JONATHAN CAPE  
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE  
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*To*  
*REGINALD ARTHUR GASKIN*  
*IN GRATITUDE*  
*FOR THE FRIENDSHIP AND SERVICE*  
*OF MANY YEARS*







## BOOK ONE



## CHAPTER I

### SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

At the end of the passage,' said the butler, 'there is a goblin.'

The little group of trippers glanced nervously over their shoulders. They had each paid one and sixpence (thirty cents) for the privilege of visiting the great house of Polesden Lacey, with all its treasures, but nothing had been said, in the entrance hall, about goblins. One detected, on their faces, a faint anxiety, as though they feared that goblins might be 'extra', though one very old lady, whose hands were so shaky that they could hardly hold the catalogue, looked as though she, for one, was about to suggest that if there were goblins there should also be a reduction.

But as we moved along in the butler's wake — at a more than respectful distance behind him — no imp materialized, nor even the smallest, most harmless poltergeist. Instead, there loomed up from the semi-darkness a great tapestry, and on the faces of those who recognized it as belonging to the school of the Gobelins, there dawned a superior smile, and they turned to one another, hissing their little joke. 'Gobelins . . . Gobelins' — the magic word drifted in whispers around us, while from the wall the faded hunters and their ladies, stitched into exquisite immortality, regarded us with a blend of patronage and disdain.

'Further down the passage,' barked the butler, recalling us all to our senses, 'there is a picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds 1723-92. It is called Venus and the Piping Boy. Venus is seen reclining wistfully in a woody landscape. She wears . . .'

But I had had enough. I suddenly had an urgent desire to recline wistfully in a woody landscape myself. So I murmured an excuse and hurried away, past the Cuyyps and the Ruysdaels and the van Goyens, through the hall with its Grinling Gibbons carving, and out into the sunshine of a sparkling October afternoon.

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

For the butler had been right. At the end of the passage there *had* been a goblin. There had always been a goblin at Polesden, though it was only now that I realized it.

And the name of the goblin was War.

### § II

It is an uncanny experience to visit, as a tourist, a house where one has often stayed as a guest — to drive down the great avenue of beeches and to be directed to a car park, to walk across familiar lawns which are now littered with curious strangers, to stand in a queue of trippers outside the front door, to be greeted by a stern custodian of the State instead of by old Bowles, the head butler, who always smiled as though you were the one person he was longing to see.

It was a busy afternoon; the brilliant weather had brought many visitors; and we were obliged to wait in the porch till the previous party had completed its round. I glanced towards the side-table, where the visitors' book had been wont to stand. (Its first entry was Edward R. and throughout the succeeding years the pages sprouted with royal signatures, most of them looking as though some insane insect had been dipped in ink and had executed an angry *pas seul* on the thick creamy paper.) But now the book had disappeared, and in its place was a pile of green-covered booklets. Purchasing one of these for a shilling, I glanced at the familiar story, telling how Polesden Lacey had been left in 1942 to the National Trust, as a museum and picture gallery, by the Honourable Mrs. Ronald Greville. (They did not add that she also left £250,000 (1,000,000 dollars) for its upkeep.) There followed a number of rather dull details — and then, to my surprise, I read: 'In the year 1797, the estate was acquired by the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the famous orator and dramatist, and the close friend of Fox and the Prince Regent. Sheridan, who enjoyed playing the country squire, gradually bought up much surrounding land, and took a keen interest in farming his new property, etc. etc.'



## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

How extraordinary! Time and again had I visited Polesden; there was hardly an inch of it which I had not explored with its late owner, but never had she mentioned the most exciting thing about it — that it had once belonged to the author of *The School for Scandal*. (A very apt sub-title for the house itself, I reflected, for there was certainly nothing in *that* school that Mrs. Greville needed to learn.) She had mentioned nearly everything else that came into her head — how the dear King of Spain, for instance, had never been really *quite* a gentleman — ('although he was a Hapsburg one always felt that he had only just *arrived*'). She had mentioned, *à haute voix*, and with no sort of reserve, her profound detestation of at least half the great men of her day — ('Really, my dear, one could not possibly be *seen* with Mr. Baldwin') — and she never tired of boasting that she was not only a good friend but a first-class enemy — ('Lord Lloyd had the impertinence to imagine that he was going to be Viceroy of India, but I soon put a stop to *that*!'). A perpetual stream of worldly gossip and invective had flowed from her; every twist and turn of the house had suggested some anecdote from her richly stored past; but not once had she mentioned the name of Sheridan. Well, perhaps it was not so surprising, after all. She had little time for the arts; to her, the principal purpose of a piano was to serve as a convenient platform for a display of royal photographs; and, as far as I am aware, the only writer besides myself to whom she ever offered much hospitality was Sir Osbert Sitwell. No, I reflected, it was all of a piece. She would not have bothered about the author of *The Rivals*. 'My dear,' I could almost hear her saying, 'one simply could not be *seen* with Mr. Sheridan.'

### § III

What a long time the first party was taking! I rose, and peered through the glass door to see if there was any sign of their return. No. The great hall was deserted. But there, I noticed, still stood the nice old Tudor table on which, every

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

evening at six o'clock, the footman used to lay out the drinks. And as I pressed my nose against the glass — (arousing, as I did so, the hostile stare of the custodian, who was not used to people stepping out of a queue) — the hall seemed gradually to be filling with ghosts . . . I heard the clink of glasses, the sound of voices. . . .

One of those voices was Winston Churchill's. He did not often go to Polesden — his was too virile a spirit to endure even the suggestion of any petticoat influence; but on two occasions I had the good fortune to be his fellow guest. On each of them he was superb. His 'finest hour' was after dinner, when the ladies had left the table, with more than usually earnest entreaties that we should not be too long over our port, for they knew from bitter experience that when Winston was at a dinner table, with a good cigar in one hand and a better Armagnac in the other, the chances were that they would be left without cavaliers till nearly bedtime, and would have to spend the rest of the evening hissing at one another over acres of Aubusson. Even as I write I can see Winston, tilting back his chair, warming a balloon glass of the precious Armagnac between his palms, and behind him, the cherry red of the boy's coat in one of Raeburn's most delightful pictures, *The Paterson Children*. Over this table he delivered some of his most sombre prophecies, and always, of course, they were about Germany, and always, too, he seemed to see Germany as a *machine*, a sort of steel monster that was clanking down the corridors of history towards us. I wish I could quote him verbatim, but one does not 'vamp' the words of a master; and the only typically Winstonian phrase which occurs to me concerns his own son, Randolph Churchill.

I happened to have been engaged with Randolph, a few days before, in a public debate. It was in aid of some charity or other; the subject had been Pacifism; the occasion, stormy. Doubtless Randolph Churchill has many charms, but on the few occasions that I have met him he has hidden them. In short, we do not like each other. However, I could not say so to his father.



ENTRANCE HALL AT POLESDEN LACEY



## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

'So you have been debating with Randolph?' said Winston, as we moved to the door.

Yes, I said, that was so; and I racked my brains to think of something pleasant to say about him. He had, in those days, a good figure, but that seemed hardly relevant. Then it occurred to me that there had been one outstanding thing about his speech, apart from its assurance and its fluency; he had a remarkable command of *gesture*. In those days he was in his very early twenties, yet he had all the physical tricks of a practised orator. I said as much to Winston.

'Yes,' agreed Winston, taking a long puff at his cigar, '*he's got the big guns; but has he got the ammunition?*'

It was a perfect epigram; all the more so as it was lit by the understanding of love.

In justice to Randolph I must add that when I last heard him speak, the big guns were still firing strong and there was no shortage of ammunition.

### § I V

The ghosts faded; I turned from the glass door and resumed my seat.

'That first party's taking its time,' complained one of the trippers.

'They've only been twenty minutes,' rebuked the custodian. 'They may be another half-hour yet.'

In the corner next to me two women began to talk in low voices about Mrs. Greville herself.

'Did you ever see her?'

'Yes, once, driving in her motor. She wasn't anything much to look at. Common, I thought — on the stout side, with grey hair. She had the Queen of Spain with her. Now, there *was* a lady.'

'It's funny, isn't it, giving this house to the nation, with everything in it, just as it was, for ever?'

The other one nodded. 'Vanity I call it. Why, I'm told they even put the same flowers she used to like, in the vases,

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

and they've kept her big quill pen just where she left it, on her desk.'

'Well, really! Her pen! As if she were Napoleon!'

Their voices trailed off into a whisper.

'But she *was* a sort of Napoleon,' I felt like telling them. 'A social Napoleon. They don't make women like that nowadays. She wasn't beautiful, she was brilliant, she was a fabulous snob. And yet, one had been genuinely fond of her.'

Why?

Certainly it was not because of her vast wealth, for Maggie Greville — I really can't go on calling her Mrs. Greville — Maggie kept a very firm grip on the purse-strings, and anybody who cultivated her acquaintance for what he could 'get out of her' soon found that he was wasting his time. The only present she ever gave me was a small jade paper-knife; it was handed to me by a footman, one Christmas eve, and it was in a leather Cartier case of which the satin was so faded that I suspected she was unloading on me something which had been given to her by somebody else. (The suspicion was correct; it had been given to her twenty years before by Gracie Vanderbilt.) Apart from this there were occasional promises to give her more intimate friends a dozen bottles of a certain super beer for which her breweries were famous — (it had been a great favourite with King Edward, and was reputed to be as potent as brandy) — but the beer never materialized. Indeed, that beer was a sort of family joke. People used to say to one another: 'Has Maggie sent you any of her beer yet?' And the answer was always in the negative.

She was, in fact, a mean woman, but one did not seem to care. She once said to me: 'Everybody else leaves their money to the poor; I am going to leave my money to the rich.' (And she did.) In any other woman such a sentiment would have been more than faintly repulsive; in Maggie it was right and proper. On another occasion, discussing the mounting tide of tax and super-tax, she said in all seriousness: 'You know, my dear, if things really got desperate, if I were reduced to — let us say — my last £10,000 (40,000 dollars) a year — I should

## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

leave the country and go and live very quietly in two rooms in Paris. Naturally, I wouldn't be able to entertain, but perhaps, sometimes, a few of my old friends might care to drop in and have a cup of tea.' Again, in any other woman, the idea of bravely trying to make both ends meet on £10,000 a year would have been merely tiresome. But, as Maggie drew the picture, one felt a real sympathy for her; I could almost have dived into my own pocket, to relieve her from anxiety.

Then what *was* it that made one like her? It would be gross sentimentality to suggest that underneath the glittering exterior she was a simple, golden-hearted woman, who cared nothing for the things of this world, and whose heart was really with the hollyhocks. She cared avidly, voraciously, for the things of this world and she didn't give a hoot for the hollyhocks. Strange as it was, I believe that her most endearing quality was her maliciousness, and her own enjoyment of it; it was sheer delight to watch her preparing her poisoned darts, sharpening them, dipping them in the most virulent acid and then launching them — always with a smile and a little dove-like coo. I only once endeavoured to take a record of her conversation, which Lord Balfour described as 'a sort of honeyed poison'; and though it rings only faintly down the years it is perhaps worth copying from my diary. It was the first week-end of 1937; the guests were Prince and Princess Bismarck, the Belgian and Chilean Ambassadors, Field-Marshal Lord Cavan and his wife, the Sacheverell Sitwells, the youngest Rumbold boy and myself. Sacheverell and I arrived early, and took tea with her in the vast crimson drawing-room, which was really quite appalling — over-gilt, over-velveted, over-mirrored, like an extremely expensive bordel. The poisoned darts were soon flying in all directions.

MAGGIE Now I *never* say unkind things about people. Have you ever heard me say an unkind thing about anybody, Twenty-Five?

(Maggie always called me 'Twenty-Five' because it was just after I had written that bundle of impudence that we met. And

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

though we were friends for nearly twenty years, it was 'Twenty-Five' — to the last.)

MYSELF (*gulping*) Never.

MAGGIE But if anybody says anything unpleasant to me, I always make the same reply. I always say 'Thank you *so* much for telling me that. And next time I hear anything unpleasant about you, which I expect will be very soon, I shall be sure to repeat it to you.' Why are you smiling, Sachy?

SACHEVERELL I was only thinking of what you said about Lady X.

MAGGIE But I have never said anything about her. Whenever her affairs are discussed I always say 'I do not follow people to their bedrooms.' With people like Lady X at large, it is much the safest policy.

(For some reason or other we began to discuss the American hostess, Mrs. Corrigan.)

MAGGIE I was once cut by Mrs. Corrigan. It is really my only claim to importance. When she first came to London and was pointed out to me, I was informed that because she had a great deal of money she would get into English Society. I decided that I did not wish to know her. She may be charming — I'm sure she is — I do *not* say unkind things about people — but I did not wish to know her. I was also shortly going to America and I knew that if I could arrive in New York saying that I did not know Mrs. Corrigan my stock would go up at once.

Well, she began to ask me to dinner. I replied that I had not the pleasure of her acquaintance and that in any case I was very much engaged. The invitations continued to arrive — she sent unofficial ambassadors in the shape of impoverished countesses — but I still refused to go.

Then I went to Paris. And one day I had to dine with Lady Mendl. I do *not* say unkind things about people, but I do *not* like Lady Mendl. (Not liking Lady Mendl was Maggie's loss; she missed a great deal of fun. B. N.). I'm sure she has *many* good points, but I can do without them. And though I am told that she has a good cook, I have also a good cook myself. I do



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not have to leave my own house in order to eat a decent meal. Of course, in Paris, that is exceptional. If you were to put a boiled fowl in the middle of the Place de la Concorde you could get the whole of the Faubourg St. Germain to come and eat it with you.

I do *not* like Lady Mendl, though I would never say a thing against her, and the only time I ever went to her house was by mistake. But that is too long a story. However, when I arrived, who should be there but Mrs. Corrigan. And what should she do, when she saw me, but cut me? Which of course was most gratifying.

And when I saw her again, some years afterwards, she was brought up to me, and in front of everybody I said 'You did me a great honour, Mrs. Corrigan, by cutting me. I do not know anybody who is of sufficient importance to cut. But you made me feel very important. I thank you.'

But no — the echo grows too faint; the acid has lost its sting; maybe because the whole world, in the past decade, has supped so deep of poison.

Besides, the tourists have at last returned, the glass door has swung open, and the guide is calling . . . 'The next ten ladies and gentlemen, if you please.'

One by one we file inside.

### § v

Yes — it is just as it was. True, there are no drinks on the big oak table, no neatly folded copies of the newspapers and magazines; otherwise, all is the same, and it is impossible to believe that in a moment the familiar figure will not appear at the top of the staircase, and demand, in the gentlest of tones: 'My dear Twenty-Five, what are all these extraordinary people doing in my house?'

It is not till we reach the drawing-room that I notice any difference. The grand piano has been taken away, and the silver-framed photographs, which used to rattle a disturbing accompaniment to anything but the gentlest of nocturnes, have

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

been distributed round the room — the King and Queen — the Kaiser (signed 'Affectionately Wilhelm 1896') — the Aga Khan — the Duke of Cambridge — Lord Balfour — the Queen of Spain — the Duchess of Devonshire. As I pause again before these faded likenesses it seems that on all their faces is an air of faint surprise, as though they too were puzzled by the tourists they saw filing before them, as though, if they could only speak, they would ask 'But where on earth did Maggie pick such people up?'

The thought of the piano set me wandering down another long trail of memories; the guide's voice was forgotten; I lived again one of my most memorable week-ends at Polesden, when the guest of honour was the Queen. (In those days she was still Duchess of York.) Though it was a royal entertainment it seemed rather less pompous than usual, maybe because the Queen is the most natural of persons, and because everybody, in her presence, laughs a little more gaily, talks a little more brightly, and gives instinctively of his best. It is impossible — as the reader may be noticing — to write of Queen Elizabeth without using all the clichés of adulation; one's pen performs all the antics of courtly flattery and yet — one is writing from the heart. From the moment when, before dinner, she appeared at the top of the staircase, in a shimmering dress of white satin, with the soft lights gleaming on a treble rope of perfect pearls, I found myself captivated. The keynote to her personality is 'radiance', and it comes from within. There is a light *behind* her eyes, as well as upon them, and one knows too that there is a light in her heart. There are some women of exceptional purity and sweetness of whom I have always had the fancy that they would shine in the dark, as though they were phosphorescent. Her Majesty is one of those women.

The week-end did not pass without embarrassment. This was due to a royal encounter which was occasioned by my constitutional inability to lie late in bed on Sunday mornings. Most of the guests at Polesden lay very late indeed. Sometimes, if Lord Horne was a member of the party, as he often was, he could be seen at about eleven o'clock dragging off a somewhat reluctant Lord Dundonald for a game on the private golf course.

## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

And once, it was reputed, the Brazilian Ambassador had gone to Mass, thereby lowering himself in Maggie's estimation, for she regarded religion as a frivolous luxury, an almost shameful self-indulgence which, unless kept under strict control, must inevitably distract one from one's stern duties to Society. Apart from these few exceptions, the guests would drift downstairs at about noon, the men in tweeds, armed with crumpled copies of the *Observer* or the *Sunday Times*, the women freshly powdered and pommelled by their maids, and usually scented with Chanel Number 5 — (an odour which offended Maggie's nostrils almost as much as the odour of sanctity, for Madame Chanel was among her many *bêtes noires*, and she resented the thought of good British money — and even worse, of good Scotch money — being poured into her lap).

But the moment of embarrassment is evading us. It happened like this. Sunday morning was bright and gusty; it was impossible to stay in one's room, with the wind racing the shadows across the valley; one must go out and sniff, and expand the chest, and stride along, thinking appropriate thoughts. So down I went at ten o'clock, walking softly across the great hall, in order not to attract the attention of those housemaids who, in large country houses, in the early hours, seem always to be lurking behind screens with the special object of shooting out of the room, when disturbed, like pheasants.

Then came snag number one. The massive front door was locked and bolted. I began to fiddle with it, but only succeeded in releasing a chain which fell on to the stone floor with a noisy clatter. Oh dear — what would happen now? Royalty would be awakened. Housemaids would rise in coveys. Worst of all X would appear, with his red face and his mocking eyes. . . .

Once again, I must defer our 'moment of embarrassment', for the thought of X has reminded me of a story which makes me laugh. X was a male servant, but whether he was a footman or a butler need not here concern us; the relevant fact was that at Christmas he invariably got drunk. At all other times he was as sober as a judge, but Christmas seemed to go to his head. In view of his long service, and his otherwise estimable character,

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

Maggie had trained herself to overlook this annual transgression, but on the particular Christmas of our story, when I happened to be among the guests, he was in such an advanced state of inebriation, and staggered round the room with such abandon, and spilt such large quantities of champagne on the carpet, that Maggie beckoned to him and hissed in his ear: 'Leave the room immediately — you are drunk!'

Whereupon — never dreaming that her orders would be disobeyed — she returned to her favourite sport of the moment, which was baiting Lady Chamberlain.<sup>1</sup>

'Dear Ivy Chamberlain!' she crooned to Lord Reading, who was sitting on her left. 'How well she is looking tonight!' And she kissed her hand in the direction of Lady Chamberlain, who was sitting at the other end of the table.

This was, of course, as we all knew, the signal for a frontal attack. When Maggie called any of her female friends 'dear' in that tone of voice, one could be sure that the sword was already half-way out of its sheath.

'I hear great things of her recent trip to Rome,' continued Maggie, in dulcet tones. 'Mussolini, it seems, was quite *épris*. They were constantly together, and dear Ivy assures me that the Duce will do practically anything she tells him.' She sighed, to give greater effect to her final thrust. '*Well . . . it would not be the first time that Rome had been saved by a goose!*'

It was cruel; it was unjust; it was delicious. But at precisely that moment, when Maggie turned to savour the applause which was her due, a splash of icy champagne landed on her naked shoulder, tossed from the erratic clutch of X, who by that time was in a state of very careless rapture. It was too much. Seizing the little Cartier gold pencil which she always carried in her bag, and snatching a menu card from in front of her, she printed on it, in large block capitals:

LEAVE THE ROOM IMMEDIATELY. YOU ARE DRUNK.

MARGARET GREVILLE.

<sup>1</sup> The widow of Sir Austen Chamberlain, who was Foreign Secretary in Mr. Baldwin's government.

## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

Beckoning to X, she thrust the card into his hand.

'Read that!' she hissed.

Swaying more than slightly, he read it. And then he did a most terrible thing. He slithered over to the sideboard, seized a large silver tray, placed the card on it, slithered over to the other end of the table, bowed low, and presented the card to Lady Chamberlain.

'With Mrs. Greville's . . . hic . . . compliments,' he murmured. And that, as they say, was that.

### § V I

But we must return to our royal moment of embarrassment.

When I discovered that the front door was locked, I decided to try one of the French windows in the drawing-room. So I walked down the corridor and opened the door of the drawing-room which, in the early morning light, looked more like the entrance to a bordel than ever. As luck would have it, not a single housemaid was there to scurry into the shadows; I had the room to myself; and as there was no hurry, I went over to the piano, removed one or two photographs of grand-duchesses, exchanged the piano-stool for a sensible chair — (like all seats that are set before pianos in the houses of unmusical people, it was so high that one's knees were almost on a level with the keyboard) — and began to play.

There is a certain enchantment in playing on strange pianos, especially if, as in this case, they are of the first rank. The music that one makes seems to assume a freshness of colour, and the strangeness of the keyboard — for no two keyboards ever seem to be quite alike — is a challenge to one's fingers. I have some facility for improvisation; and though it is a sterile talent it is one with which I would reluctantly dispense; improvisation is the supreme example, in art, of living for the moment. And since this was a happy moment, a sunny moment, and above all, a royal moment — for the presence of the Queen seemed to permeate the whole house — I began to compose variations on the grand old tune of 'God Save the King'. I played it in the

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style of Debussy's 'Jardins sous la Pluie', I turned it into a funeral march, switched it into a Chopinesque mazurka, and had just begun it in the form of a Bach fugue when the door opened, and looking up, I saw Her Majesty the Queen.

I rose to my feet, suddenly realizing the enormity of the situation.

'But please do not stop,' she said. And then: 'What was it you were playing?'

'It was . . . it was just something of my own, ma'am.'

'I see. Somehow it sounded . . . faintly familiar. Can you play it again?'

'I would rather play some Chopin, ma'am.'

'Yes, perhaps it would be better.'

She sat down, and with a sigh of relief I took a header into the Scherzo in B flat minor. It seemed the most suitable music for the occasion.

## § VII

'If you please, sir . . . *if* you please. The rest of the party is waiting.'

The guide's voice brought me back to the present. While I had been dreaming the tourists had made a circuit of the room and were now standing in the doorway waiting for me to follow.

I joined them, and at a leisurely pace we proceeded down the corridor, at whose end, the reader may remember, lurked the 'goblin' who was to bring our story to its close. I was ready for him long ere we reached him, for in the next few moments my mind had taken a step forward, and I found myself recalling my last meeting with Maggie.

It was at the Dorchester Hotel in 1942, a few days before her death. Her great house in Charles Street was shut up, its rooms shrouded in dust sheets, and though Polesden was still open, there was only a skeleton staff to run it. However, that was not the real reason why Maggie chose to leave its comparative security, and to establish herself, dying as she was, in the very

## SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

centre of this city of terror, with its wailing siren-haunted skies. Rather, I am convinced, was it because here she could exercise to the last and to the full her unique talent for malicious comment. The Dorchester at that time had a reputation for safety; it was of the most modern construction of steel and concrete; and consequently it was greatly in demand among those who, unlike Maggie, were obliged by business to pass their nights beneath a rain of bombs.

Here Maggie installed herself, not on the ground floor, not inside, like the cowards, but high up, overlooking Hyde Park, in a large suite of rooms whose safety value was considerably less than many other parts of the hotel. And here, during raids, she would issue little crooning invitations to some of her friends — particularly if she disapproved of their war record — asking them to come up and keep her company. They very seldom had the courage to refuse; it was easier to brave the Luftwaffe than to incur Maggie's displeasure.

The sirens had just sounded for the third time that night as I entered the hotel, and I expected to find her in her usual chair, with the telephone by her side, calling up her friends. ('But my *dear* Lord X, you really *must* come up. I'm sure the air in that shelter is very bad, and I *know* you have a weak chest!')

This time, however, she was in bed, and it needed no second glance to inform one that Maggie's world, in every sense of the word, was drawing rapidly to an end. She looked frail and shrunken, and yet, indomitably *mondaine*. All the apparatus of luxury surrounded her. By her bedside was a bowl of yellow orchids. On her hands the fabulous diamonds still sparkled, though she was now so thin that she had to clench her fingers to prevent them from slipping off.

'Dear Twenty-five,' she murmured, 'coming all this way to see an old woman on a night like this. Not like Lord X, who will not even come upstairs. But then, of course, the X's were always cowards. I remember . . .'

And she proceeded to remember. And for a little while the memories had the same subtle malice that had always enchanted me. But not for long. The malice flickered lower,

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like a lamp going out, and now and then there was even a faint glow of that Christian charity that so often hovers round the scenes of death.

Soon after dinner I rose to go, for she was very weak.

'Au revoir, Maggie.'

She shook her head. 'I think not, my dear Twenty-Five. I think it is goodbye.'

Suddenly the windows rattled as a bomb fell unpleasantly near, in Hyde Park.

'That damned Ribbentrop,' she whispered. 'Thank God I told him what I thought of him when he came to Polesden.'

'What was that, Maggie?'

'I told him that if ever there was a war, he might beat the English, but he would never beat the Scots.'

Her eyes closed, and she fell asleep. I had heard the last of Maggie's reminiscences.



## CHAPTER II

### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

GOODBYE, dear 'Twenty-Five,' the rich old woman had murmured, smiling at me for the last time in war-stricken London, while the bombs rained final havoc on her world.

And if this book were a film, now would be the moment to sweep back the camera for nearly twenty years, over the high and placid roofs of a city that has vanished, till it arrived at a quiet side-street near the Marble Arch. There, in a two-roomed flat, it would come to rest on the features of a young man who was reading — with a somewhat ironic smile — a bundle of highly satisfactory press-cuttings.

*Twenty-Five*, which took its title from the age of the author, was my first best-seller. 'And about time too,' I thought, recalling the three novels which had preceded it,<sup>1</sup> and the few paltry thousands they had sold. It was nearly four years since I had arrived in London from Oxford with what is known as a 'reputation', and my initial capital — £2 — was still approximately the same. True, I had been self-supporting and had lived well, but I wanted a good deal more than that. I wanted real money and I wanted it while I was young enough to enjoy it. I still think that this is a laudable and essentially moral ambition — though nowadays many young Englishmen appear to regard the possession of an income of more than £500 a year as a crime against the State, particularly if they have already inherited £500 a year, and have no intention of working to make it into £5000. Such an attitude, to me, is tiresome, and creates in me a desire to put on a top-hat and walk down Whitechapel throwing magnums of champagne into the air and saying 'Come, let us grind the faces of the poor.' For if I have not known actual poverty, I have at least known what it is to be obliged to go from one tea-shop to another,

<sup>1</sup> *Prelude*, *Patchwork* and *Self* (Chatto & Windus).

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studying the fly-blown menus in their brass frames outside the entrances, trying to decide whether there is better value in the fourpenny meat patties at X's or the fivepenny fish cakes at Y's. In such periods I was not proud of myself; I regarded my poverty as a personal slur; I certainly never blamed it as a fault of the 'social system'. In those days I was little interested in the social system; I was interested in life. I got it, to the full.

If this were an orthodox autobiography, it would travel automatically from 'Twenty-Five' to 'Twenty-Six', 'Twenty-Seven' and so on, with helpful little signposts showing the gradual ascent of the author, the dawn of his love-life, etc. But I am not sure if I have ascended, and my love-life is pretty static.

The reader will therefore perhaps excuse me if, instead of going forward, I step back to the year 1921. For it was then that I entered Fleet Street, and through Fleet Street, the broad avenues of the world.

Fleet Street used to be — as Sir Philip Gibbs reminded us — the Street of Adventure; today it is the Street of Peradventure; its future is shrouded in uncertainty. No longer can a young man jump off a bus at Fetter Lane and stride down some grimy side-street with the thought that maybe, just round the corner, some story will 'break' which will set him on the road which was trodden by a Northcliffe or a Hearst. The days of such giants are numbered; the conditions which nurtured them have vanished; and whether you think that good or bad, one thing is certain — life, in consequence, is considerably less colourful.

The modern British reporter is set an almost impossible task; the space at his disposal in our shrunken sheets is so diminished that there is little chance for brilliance, for individuality, for the story with a beginning, a middle and an end, flashing its way like a lightning streak down the length of a column. The tale must be told in a tiny paragraph. It is like asking a Barrymore to play Hamlet on a beer-barrel.

But worse than this merely physical handicap is the oppressive atmosphere of smugness and drabness which, with certain

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rare exceptions, seems to permeate the editorial offices of the British press. The heroine of the hour is Mrs. Bloggs, the housewife, and she is portrayed in every possible position, standing in queues waiting for an extra ounce of margarine, mending a torn mackintosh, or — at her most festive — leering from a charabanc with a paper cap on her head. To me, and perhaps to a few other decadent misfits, this is depressing. I am bored with reading about Mrs. Bloggs. I would rather read about very wicked old duchesses, covered with diamonds, in the deepest evening dress, drinking themselves to death in ruined castles. And so, if I am not very much mistaken, would Mrs. Bloggs. She must be as tired of herself as I am.

It is all summed up in one of Northcliffe's favourite phrases — 'fish and chips'. This was an odour which caused his nostrils to quiver with indignation. To him it represented all that was sordid, all that was unsuccessful, all that savoured of the mean streets. The least suggestion of it in any of his newspapers or magazines, even those which circulated among the poorest classes of the community, made him see red. On the only occasion that I met him — I was at that time a very junior contributor to the *Daily Mail* — he was striding round his office in Northcliffe House, shaking his finger violently at one of his news editors and crying 'That story on page three reeked of fish and chips. It *reeked* of it!'

What would Northcliffe have done about Mrs. Bloggs? Presumably he would have 'taken her out of herself'. He certainly would not have encouraged her to believe — as she is encouraged to believe today — that there is some subtle virtue in drabness. Even more certainly he would not have joined in the general homage to the Little Man.<sup>1</sup> Why should we admire this hideous, bespectacled midget, this badgered, hen-pecked nonentity? Why should he be placed on a pedestal for the admiration of the citizens of a great Empire? And why, conversely, should the Big Man, the leader, the man who has

<sup>1</sup> For the benefit of American readers it may be mentioned that the Little Man is the central figure of Strube's cartoon in Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, which has the largest circulation — over three million — of any daily newspaper in the world.

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risen to command, be held up to universal ridicule in the person of Colonel Blimp? Perhaps the explanation is to be found in that vague word 'reaction'; perhaps it is merely a question of a retreat from the age of heroics, a revulsion against the antics of the superman.

In any case, a reaction — and a violent one — from some of the traditions of Fleet Street, in the days when I entered it, was long overdue.

### § 11

My first staff job in Fleet Street was as a reporter on the *Sunday Dispatch*. The year was 1921. The position was the humblest in the office; there was no regular salary attached to it; I was only paid for what I managed to 'get in'.

For a week or two it was hard going. My first assignment was to interview an elephant at the Zoo — if elephants can be interviewed. (I would prefer them to some politicians.) This particular elephant, which for years had wandered round the gardens in the most docile fashion, carrying children on its back, had suddenly revolted; no sooner did it see a child than it shot out its trunk, wriggled its back, and showed every sign of acute aversion.

'That's a nice human story for you,' observed the editor — meaning, of course, precisely the opposite of what he said. 'It ought to run to half a column.'

Half a column was two guineas, of which I stood greatly in need, so I went off to the Zoo with a high heart, found the elephant, felt an immediate sympathy for it, and after a few minutes retired to a seat to write the story. It was, I thought, a bright little piece, with a pardonable touch of whimsy. I wrote it in the first person, i.e. *by* the elephant. I said how sick I was of these hideous children scrambling about on top of me; they were common and smelly and they tickled. I said that I would not mind carrying a very beautiful, feather-light princess, who would sit on my back like a flower, but that no such person ever came my way. The only royalty who had

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been near the Zoo for weeks was Queen Mary, and she had shown not the smallest inclination to ride on me. It was high time I went back to the jungle, etc. etc.

That story nearly got me the sack. It had, apparently, every journalistic fault. In Fleet Street, I was told, children were never hideous, never common, never smelly. They were nearly always little flowers. When they were not being little flowers they were being the future of the race. When they were not being the future of the race they were making wonderful epigrams about their parents. Children, in short, were 'it'.

The same fate attended my next few stories. After the elephant I was dispatched to interview a female centenarian. She, poor dear, said even less than the elephant, and sat staring at me with small red eyes, occasionally muttering, to nobody in particular, the phrase 'Boo-boo-la-la.' This, I felt, was an insufficient basis on which to build the sparkling denunciation of 'the modern girl' which my editor had requested me to obtain from her, and I returned to the office empty-handed.

And so it went on. It would only bore the reader to narrate the painful steps by which, little by little, I acquired the reporter's technique and — which was more important — learned the twists and turns of that strange mass of prejudice, superstition, tradition and, above all, snobbery, which made up the Fleet Street mentality.

And that brings us back to Mrs. Bloggs, the heroine of the modern age. For in those days Mrs. Bloggs was never even mentioned; she was far beneath us; to the editorial mind there was 'no such person'. We dealt only in lords and ladies.

That was Fleet Street's besetting sin — its grotesque snobbery; and maybe the prevalent worship of the 'housewife' is only a natural reaction.

If you consult the files of a great national newspaper like the *Sunday Dispatch*, you will find an astonishing array of obscure countesses, viscountesses and, if the worst came to the worst, wives of baronets, all pontificating with monotonous regularity on the problems of the hour. It mattered not at all that these ladies were, in many cases, barely literate, and that the ideas

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they were supposed to originate had been put into their empty heads by some member of the reporting staff. The public could not be expected to know that. All *they* knew was that here was the Countess of X proclaiming to nearly a million readers that the 'modern girl' was this, that or the other. (Whichever it was, it was nearly always something very unpleasant.)

So great a change in public fashion is a matter of some historical importance. It may therefore be of interest to visit an editorial conference in the office of the *Sunday Dispatch*, where, as I have mentioned, I was now installed.

### § III

The *Sunday Dispatch*, in spite of its million-odd circulation, had a very small editorial staff. Apart from the editor — of whom more in a moment — there was only the news editor, the editress of the woman's page, the art editor, the sports correspondent and about three reporters, of whom I was usually the most energetic, or, perhaps, the most 'put-upon'.

Nor were we excessively paid for our labours. Since Lord Northcliffe and his brother, Lord Rothermere, were, more than any other men, responsible for raising the status of the journalist, this observation is not intended as a reflection on their generosity. The rates in Northcliffe House were, I believe, as high as most. At the same time, one had to do rather a lot for one's money.

We were paid at the rate of three guineas a column on 'news' pages and four guineas a column on 'feature' pages — i.e. pages which contained signed articles as opposed to the rapportage of current events. Our copy was measured to the eighth of an inch, and was paid for accordingly, so that one had to write, every week, a good deal more than one's own height in words, to reach the thousand a year level. I used to carry a tape-measure in my pocket, and on Saturday nights, when the paper was in its final state — unless, of course, there was a sudden windfall in the shape of a late murder or a

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spectacular fire — I would carefully tot up the earnings of the week. Four inches for 'Mystery Doctor denies Knowledge of Countess', eight inches for 'Twelve-Toed Baby', nearly two feet for 'Savages of Mayfair' by the Viscountess of X, the usual foot and a half for 'If you are expecting a little one' — (a series in which I had a peculiarly delicate touch — largely because it was a subject on which I held high ideals without any painful personal experience) — one foot on 'Arab Prince's Strange Hobby', two inches on 'Ghouls in the Gallery' — and another two feet on 'My Worst Experience' by Marie Tempest.

Not a bad week, I would think to myself. Nearly eighteen pounds. And never a dull moment.

To revert to the weekly 'conference'. Here, roughly, was the procedure. On Tuesday mornings at ten o'clock we would file into the sanctum of the editor. It was luxuriously carpeted and panelled, and it formed a restful contrast to the clatter of the office outside. There, turning nervously backwards and forwards in a swivel chair, behind an immense desk, a singular figure awaited us. Small, pale and vivid, he was usually stroking his prominent nose with one hand and plucking the lapel of his jacket with the other. In the meantime he regarded us from behind horn-rimmed glasses with an expression of the deepest melancholy. He never spoke till we were all seated. And then — after a sigh — some utterly inconsequential remark would startle us — made all the more bizarre by the Lancashire accent in which it was delivered. Thus — to the editress of the woman's page:

'Should a woman put perfume on a Pekinese?'

Before the lady had time to invent a suitable riposte, he would have swivelled round to the news editor and observed:

'My wife said to me that the story about the poison-pen woman was sheer fish and chips. Don't you know that none of our readers have ever heard of fish and chips? Don't you know they all live on caviar and champagne?'

And then, with a lightning swivel, to me: '*What are the three great interests of mankind?*'

I knew the answer to that one. It had been drilled into me,

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at my first conference at the office, and it became a sort of family joke. So I repeated, for the hundredth time:

‘Love, money and adventure.’

Whereupon he would nod, and sigh more deeply than ever, and mutter: ‘Well — what have we got in *that* line this week?’

Such was Bernard Falk, one of the legendary characters of Fleet Street — a figure whom only Fleet Street could have produced. For some years he has left the hurly-burly of journalism, and resides in dignified retirement, occasionally delighting the world with a book of memoirs so vivid that often the pen of the historian seems to have been hustled by the pencil of the reporter. Falk was one of Northcliffe’s happiest discoveries. He had an uncanny flair for news; he was in the royal Harmsworth tradition. I need quote only one of his inspirations — the case of the Reverend Vale Owen. Owen was an obscure, saintly, parish priest who saw visions and heard voices. One day, scanning the provincial papers, the bright eye of Bernard Falk alighted on a tiny paragraph which chronicled these phenomena. He circled the paragraph in blue pencil, and, with that gesture, added a quarter of a million to his circulation. For Vale Owen, whom he approached that same day, proved to be a mine of information about the after-life. In spite of the hullabaloo with which his revelations were presented, I believe that in that mine there were veins of pure gold.

Falk always enchanted me, although he was something of a slave-driver. He would send me out on some quite impossible story, and then, when I had failed to get it, after hours of effort, he would stare at me and shake his head and mutter: ‘So you’ve fallen down?’ Which was enough to drive a man to drink. But when one pulled something off, when one handed him a piece of good taut prose, he would beam and nod, and *stroke* the copy, as though it were something rare and precious. And he would say: ‘This is the stuff.’ And he would add, in a gruff aside: ‘I’ll put it down for ten guineas, instead of the usual rates.’

Falk was, in short, an artist. It amused him to pose as a



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vulgarian. He deliberately accentuated his Lancashire accent — rather in the manner of a French *diseuse* who has become the darling of the British public. He liked to pretend that money meant a great deal more to him than it actually did. For his three great interests in life were *not* 'love, money and adventure'. They were — his family, a story well told and, last but not least, a miniature well painted. Under glass cases, in his house at Brighton, sparkle some of the most exquisite examples of this art to be found outside the museums.

### § IV

The first task of the conference was to decide what would make a good 'splash' on the following Sunday — the 'splash' being the main headline on which we hoped to sell the paper. Sometimes the 'splash' was fore-ordained. If, for example, there was a cup-tie final on the following Saturday afternoon, it was fairly safe to assume that nothing that could happen in the world would be of greater interest than *that* — unless, of course, it was the discovery of a corpse, preferably female, in intriguing surroundings, preferably Mayfair. Even corpses, in those days, had their social status. A corpse in Whitechapel could not possibly compete, in 'news value', with a corpse in Kensington, and the nearer one approached to Grosvenor Square, the greater the desirability of the deceased. Indeed, I sometimes toyed with the idea of writing a story in which an impoverished reporter, desiring to make a few extra guineas, transported a corpse from the East End, and deposited it outside a duke's front door. 'Ghoul on Duke's Doorstep' would have been worth quite five guineas.

One type of 'splash', I remember, was a constant source of personal anxiety — the royal 'interesting event'. For some extraordinary reason it was generally assumed, in the office, that I had friends at court, and whenever an interesting event was forecast — it did not interest *me*, except as a sort of appalling menace — I was told to keep track of it. It was in

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vain that I protested that I had no such exalted connections, and that even if I had, I could hardly demand information on so delicate a subject. 'Just you keep track, my lad,' was Falk's invariable reply. 'And if you fall down on *this* . . .'

It was nerve-racking. I used to have nightmares in which I imagined that a future king had been born, and that the whole country was rejoicing, with the exception of the *Sunday Dispatch*, which, thanks to me, knew nothing of the event. Sometimes I would go to the telephone, look up the number of the royal residence where these 'interesting' things were transpiring, and frame the beginning of a conversation. 'Excuse me, but is Her Royal Highness . . . has Her Royal Highness . . . *will* Her Royal Highness . . .?' But no! It was all too shaming. Why had not one adopted some soft and easy profession, like coal-mining?

The climax of these embarrassments occurred in the week preceding the birth of a son to the Princess Royal. Nobody, not even Her Royal Highness, could possibly have desired more fervently than myself that the accouchement could be successfully accomplished. Judge, therefore, of my horror, when late on the Saturday night an office boy rushed in with a moist sheet of paper bearing the streamer headline '— Born to Princess Mary'. And underneath, in big type: 'Last night a — was born to Her Royal Highness. Large crowds gathered outside the palace, filling the night with their cheers at this historic event.'

I stared at the horrible document. I could have wept with disappointment and also, it must be confessed, with anger, for I felt that it was grossly unfair of Her Royal Highness to do this sort of thing without dropping me the slightest hint.

At that moment Falk came in. He took the sheet from my hand, glanced at it and yawned. 'That's better,' he said, and threw it into the waste-paper basket.

'But . . . but has it happened?'

'No. Another two days.'

I was bewildered. 'But what about the crowds, and the cheering?'

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Falk chuckled at my innocence. 'Well, there *will* be crowds and there *will* be cheering, won't there?'

'I suppose so.'

'That's right. We think ahead in this office, my lad. We think ahead!'

And that ended my sole experience as a chronicler to the Court of St. James's.

### § v

Our conference is being held up by a spate of irrelevancies — though perhaps these very irrelevancies may help to recreate the atmosphere.

Let us assume that the 'splash' has been decided upon, whether it is a cup-tie, a corpse or an unborn princess. The main trouble, from my point of view, is still before us, i.e. the choice of the articles for the leader page.

One would have thought that with the whole world to choose from — a world, moreover, which even then was beginning to bubble and sizzle with quite a number of disturbing echoes — the range of subjects would have been considerable. Not at all. The range of subjects was of the narrowest — not only in our paper, but in practically the whole British press. It was largely confined to variations on two words. And those words were: 'SHOULD WOMEN?'

To recall this fact is to remind oneself that between my own youth and the younger generations of today there lies, not a mere matter of twenty years, but a whole cycle, indeed, a whole series of cycles.

'SHOULD WOMEN?' It was the opening phrase of an astronomical number of journalistic futilities. Rivers of ink and mountains of newsprint have vanished in the service of these wan discussions.

'SHOULD WOMEN?'

*What* women should — or should not — was a matter of comparatively minor importance; one could affix almost any verb to the problem with equal effect. Should women cut

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their hair? That problem was a solid source of income to hundreds in Fleet Street; the combination of hair, women and scissors was an irresistible lure to the majority of editors. Which makes one wonder if the abnormalities explored in the footnotes to Krafft-Ebbing are quite as rare as one had been inclined to suppose.

Should women 'bant'? (How evocatively 'period' is that word, in these years when Europe is adrift with human skeletons!) Should women sunbathe? (This was a theme for the glossier, more expensive journals, who could afford full-page illustrations of the Dolly Sisters, achieving a beige lustre at Juan-les-Pins under the paternal glare of Mr. Gordon Selfridge.) Should women drink, eat, smoke, breathe? God forgive me, how many dreary journeys did I make, on the top of a number 6 bus, of a Tuesday morning, muttering to myself that totemistic slogan 'Should Women?' — in the hope that I might hit upon some suitably fantastic appendage which would make my editor bang his fist on the table and say: 'Beverley — that's great! Should women . . . what was it? . . . should women . . . EXIST? Gee, that's the stuff!'

And then the dreary, shaming money-grubbing began.

Let us suppose that the question on which we sought enlightenment was some old chestnut like 'Should women make up in public?' Today, when even the charwoman works with a scrubbing-brush in one hand and a lip-stick in the other, such a problem must appear more than faintly antediluvian; a glance at the files of the newspapers of twenty years ago, however, will remind the reader how fiercely such problems were once debated. If I have written this same article once I have written it a hundred times — though never, I believe, under my own name.

'Should women make up in public? That's the stuff! Now then Beverley, get busy!'

Whereupon, with death in my soul, I would get busy.

The first thing to be done was to consult 'The List'. This was a well-thumbed sheet of foolscap containing the names of about a hundred 'suckers', i.e. ladies of title who, at one time or

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another, had been induced to put their names to articles. At first glance, 'The List' was an imposing document; there were several duchesses and marchionesses, a plentiful array of countesses, and dozens of obscure wives of knights. A more intimate acquaintance with 'The List' however, was apt to be disillusioning, for one soon discovered that many of these ladies, having been once bitten, were grimly determined never to be bitten again, and would slam down the receiver if one attempted to call them up.

Others, again, would allow their names to be used only in connection with some good cause in which they happened to be particularly interested — for example, that charming old lady, the dowager Duchess of Hamilton. Her name was almost on top of the list. Unfortunately, I knew from bitter experience that she would consent to open her mouth on only one topic, which was the humane killing of cattle. And try as I would, I did not see how this cause, however admirable, could be combined with a discussion of making-up in public. Mind you, I *have* achieved, in my time, tasks that were nearly as difficult. I have entered a house whose owner was quite determined to give me an astringent article on pre-natal clinics and an hour later have emerged triumphantly with a column on 'Drunken Debutantes'.

Having decided on the victim, I lift the receiver, and the following dialogue takes place.

SELF May I speak to her ladyship, please?

BUTLER What name shall I say, sir?

SELF The Sunday Dispatch.

BUTLER (*after a pause, and in a very different tone of voice*) What's that?

SELF The Sun — day Dis — patch.

BUTLER I don't know if her ladyship's at home.

SELF Would you kindly go and see?

(BUTLER *departs with a snort. After a long interval, in which one hears all sorts of sinister whisperings and mutterings at the*

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*other end, a female voice echoes down the line, heavily charged with suspicion)*

LADY X This is Lady X. *Who* did you say it was?

SELF This is the Sunday Dispatch speak . . .

LADY X Oh dear! (*More mutterings and whisperings*) What was it about?

SELF We wondered if . . . by any chance . . . it would be possible to have a word with you some time today?

LADY X But what *about*?

SELF It's a subject of very considerable importance to modern women. (*Pause*) And . . . we . . . we all know how interested you are in women's problems. . . .

LADY X (*who is not in the least interested in women's problems*) I really don't think . . .

SELF You see, I'm quite certain that our readers would be very eager to know your views. . . .

LADY X Is it about education?

SELF (*clutching at a straw*) In a way it is. . . .

LADY X Well then, I don't know anything about *that*. (*Prepares to ring off*)

SELF (*desperately*) But only partly. It's really more a question of . . . of appearance.

LADY X (*a little less hostile*) I see. . . .

SELF And naturally, our readers would like to know the views of one of whom . . . of whom they'd heard so much.

LADY X (*hostile again*) Oh dear! Have you been putting something in already?

SELF No — not at all — and we should certainly put in nothing without your approval. (*More mutterings*) Perhaps you have a moment this afternoon?

LADY X Well . . . I really don't quite understand what it's all about . . . but . . . if you feel you *must* . . . Could you come at three?

SELF Thank you so very much. I'm sure that . . . (*But she has rung off*)

It is to conversations of this nature that I attribute my almost

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pathological hatred of the telephone. To this day, I can never answer the telephone without apprehension and I can never make a call without a subconscious conviction that I shall receive a rebuff at the other end.

One thing, however, these nightmare dialogues taught me — a deep sympathy with the front-door salesman. I know how it must feel to ring the bell, to be greeted by a hostile face, and to hear the words 'Not today, thank you'. Always I have this feeling of kinship with the young men with the strained smiles, who stand on the world's doorsteps, waiting to sell something which nobody wants.

## THESE CHARMING PEOPLE

IN these days, when wild oats are 'on points', there is something almost painfully evocative about the phrase — 'The Bright Young People'. For the crop that was sown in the mid-'twenties by this gang of boisterous juveniles was wilder and wider than at any period since the Regency rakes.

Is it because of the general drabness of modern London society that one is inclined to remember their exploits with a certain nostalgia? Life, today, is the colour of a very old mackintosh. 'Parties' are mean and tremulous foregatherings round a bottle of rationed gin. Dressing-up — that enchanting exhibitionism which should be the birthright of all young people — is out of the question.

These senile reflections have no personal application, for though Noel Coward, Evelyn Waugh and I were all supposed by the general public to be leading spirits of the Bright Young People, nothing could have been further from the truth; we all had far too much work to do; and we were in fact their most energetic critics, as we were later to prove — Noel in the theatre, Waugh in *Vile Bodies*, and myself in *Crazy Pavements*.

However, there seemed no particular object, at that moment, in denying our depravity. Noel, indeed, appeared anxious to enhance it. In a rash moment he permitted himself to be photographed in bed, looking excessively Chinese, and wearing a dressing-gown which would have been regarded as *outré* even at a circus. When this remarkable study appeared on the front page of the *Tatler*, the effect on the public was atomic; it was as though he had been photographed naked on a unicorn. From remote swamps even remoter colonels wrote to the *The Times* and asked what the youth of England was coming to; in countless officers' messes the photograph was held up as a dreadful example of the decline and fall of practically everything. Twenty years later, by an ironic twist of history, the author of



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'Cavalcade' was received in those same officers' messes with an acclaim that was all the greater because they realized that their favourite genius had also more than his fair share of 'guts'.

But that is anticipating. For the moment I would like to recapture the atmosphere of those days when life had — as it should have, for the very young — so much more rhyme than reason. It was an age of 'parties'. There were 'white' parties, in which we shot down to the country in fleets of cars, dressed in white from head to foot, and danced on a white floor laid in the orchard, with the moonlight turning all the apples to silver, and then — in a pale pink dawn — playing races with champagne corks on the surface of the stream. There were Mozart parties in which, powdered and peruked, we danced by candlelight and then — suddenly bored, rushed out into the street to join a gang excavating the gas mains at Hyde Park Corner. There were swimming parties where, at midnight, we descended on some municipal baths, hired for the occasion, and disported ourselves with an abandon that was all the fiercer because we knew that the press was watching — and watching with a very disapproving eye.

Something always seemed to *happen* at these parties, whether one wanted it or not. As a trivial example I may mention my own first party, which was given to celebrate my removal from the two-roomed flat to a five-roomed house in Chelsea. I had bought a lease of this tiny box of a place with the first royalties from *Twenty-Five*. I was excessively house-proud, and used to spend hours wandering round the place, fingering the curtains (bogus tapestry from Liberty's), testing the chairs, prodding the cushions, saying to myself: 'These things are all mine, they really belong to *me*. And I have bought them by selling words on paper — just like that. Far too many words, of course, and far too much paper. Never mind. The things are mine, and that is all that matters.'

My first party was to be very sedate and sober. Naturally, all the Bright Young People would be there, but for once in a way, I decided, we would behave properly. We would talk and eat

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and drink and listen to the piano — on which I had just paid the first monthly instalment.

But it did not work out at all like that. For among the guests was Tallulah Bankhead. And though Tallulah's beauty is still remarkable, in those days it was devilish; she had only to smile and people felt like doing — and usually did — the most outrageous things. In this case she smiled in the direction of the strip of red carpet which I had laid out over the pavement to the front door, intimating that she would like to go for a ride on it. And so, the party which had been planned with such propriety ended up in a rout, with Tallulah sitting on one end of a long red carpet and a horde of bright young people tugging at the other, whisking her over the dry, shiny streets, to an accompaniment of a piercing chorus of yelps and war-cries. It ended, of course, in the arms of the law. But as the policeman was immediately and totally incapacitated by one of Tallulah's most diabolical smiles the situation was saved, and he came back to the party as a guest. He was a *succès fou*. He drank quantities of champagne, sang 'Friend o' Mine', and 'Mother Machree', and — I should imagine — has never been the same again.

I wonder if all this sounds like the echo of music from a haunted ballroom? Or — if you prefer it — like an old cracked gramophone record? The question is prompted by the self-consciousness which must beset all those who, in an age of 'Austerity', dare to dwell on memories of pleasure. For 'pleasure', too, is an outmoded word today. If it were possible to put it 'on points', on points it would go.

### § I I

The word 'pleasure' evokes the memory of one of the most bizarre, and one of the most lovable figures of the mid-'twenties, Edward Bootle-Wilbraham, fifth Earl of Lathom.

Ned Lathom — I think we can say this literally — died in the pursuit of pleasure. It was an ironic fate for one with his background; his grandfather had been Lord Chamberlain to Queen Victoria, and until Ned's coming-of-age the Lathom name and

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the Lathom fortune had been largely associated with good works. Ned soon changed all that. He fled from the vast family mansion, leaving it to rot deserted, and installed himself in the dower house, which he fitted up with crystal staircases, swimming pools and quantities of fantastic bathrooms in marble mosaic. Then he tired of that and installed himself in London, where he flung himself heart and soul into the life of the theatre, pouring out tens of thousands, usually down the drain.

His was a figure so alien to the mood of the modern world that it is only with difficulty that one can picture him again, making his elegant passage down Bond Street, willowy, pale, immaculate; calling at Cartier's to bespeak a platinum and sapphire cigarette case that had taken his fancy; sauntering into Floris, his beloved scent shop, swinging his long legs over the counter and demanding — like a spoilt child — stronger and stranger perfumes, which he savoured through sprays obsequiously proffered by attendants who appreciated the value of his account. There he would sit, while the clock ticked nearer and nearer to the hour of luncheon, in a haze, a mist, of warring fragrances — 'Tantivy' — 'Mimosa' — 'Russian Leather' — 'New Mown Hay'. I can just catch an echo of his voice, telling a startled manager that Paris had created an inspired odour called 'Suivez moi, jeune homme'; I can just recall the arrogant tilt of his chin as he throws this equivocal phrase across the little shop, into the faces of several dowagers who are making their usual purchases of eau de Cologne and potpourri. 'Suivez moi, jeune homme' — it was a dangerous phrase, on his lips; yet there were always plenty of young men eager enough to follow him in those days, when the Lathom fortune was still immense, and when the orchids still clustered thick before the mirrors in Cumberland Place.

I first met Ned Lathom at the opera. I was about twenty-two and he was about twenty-eight. He was with a party of very glittering middle-aged women and very sleek young men, who reminded me of a group of strangely plumed birds, sitting there in the stalls, trilling and crooning. Ned looked up and cried, 'He must come to supper! This new young man must come to

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supper — mustn't he darlings?' And all the birds preened themselves and chattered 'Yes — he must certainly come to supper — he is quite delicious.' I did not feel very delicious at the moment because my dress tie was frayed and I had hastily rubbed some ink on a shiny patch on my lapel, and some of it had come off on my shirt front. All the same, I went to supper.

The first thing I remember about that supper was the scent in the hall. As the two great Rolls Royces swept up to the house, the front door opened, and at precisely that moment a footman was observed pouring drops of perfume into a heated leaden spoon. The scent hissed and sizzled in the spoon, sending a heady fragrance up the stairs, which were thickly banked with flowers. We trooped up to the first floor, into a large music-room, whose walls were covered with gold fabric.

There, already waiting for us, were Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, of whom very few people in those days had yet heard. Gertie was almost as enchanting then as she is today; she had the same air of sparkling half-wittedness, the same polished gaucherie. Nor has Noel greatly altered. He was sitting very tensely at the piano, staring at the keyboard as though it had insulted him.

Gertie sprang to her feet. She was nursing an almost life-size doll — a pierrot in pale yellow satin, with a face like a Picasso harlequin, and green gloves on his drooping hands.

She held out the pierrot, crying: 'Ned darling, Noel has just made up the most divine song about this . . .' And she began to sing, to Noel's accompaniment:

Parisian pierrot,  
Society's hero,  
The lord of a day,  
The Rue de la Paix  
Is under your sway. . . .

Noel broke off suddenly, and observed, with Chinese impassivity: 'If you would sing a little *more* out of tune, darling, you would find yourself singing in thirds, which would be a great improvement.'

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Which was the signal for one of those inspired quarrels of the 'Private Lives' variety, which Noel later turned to such good account in a succession of brilliant comedies.

Poor Ned Lathom . . . the lyric of Noel's song might, without undue exaggeration, have been applied to himself. During the few years of life that were left to him he burnt the candles at both ends and in the centre too. Neither his fortune nor his physique were equal to the strain of his extravagance. When, later on, I went to stay with him at Blythe (the dower house on the Lathom estate in Lancashire), I was dazzled — as any very young man would be — by the display of luxury, but I was also a little sickened by it. I could not see the point of pouring an entire five-pound bottle of perfume into a bath. It seemed to me unnecessary to engage a sleeping car to send a footman down to London, merely that he might return by noon with a special brand of chocolate almonds from Charbonnel and Walker. I could not get used to caviar served as lavishly as though it were bubble and squeak. It irked me to hear him dictating long letters to his secretary, all of which had to be sent off in the form of telegrams.

My feelings of regret were deepened because, behind this baroque and opulent façade, there was a kindly, gentle personality, and a highly intelligent brain. The other day I chanced upon one of the three plays Ned published before his death — 'The Way You Look At It'. It still bears comparison with the early work of Maugham; and one day, some enterprising society might do worse than revive it. It has its place in the *curiosa* of the English theatre.

The last time I saw Ned, nearly everything had gone, and he was obviously dying. He had galloping consumption. It was a living skeleton that rose to greet me in the sitting-room at Claridges where he was staying, and as he smiled it was like the smile on the face of a skull.

But his gay, electric spirit was still indomitable, and as I bade him goodbye, he thrust into my hands a great glowing bunch of orchids.

'Don't forget to send something like this to my funeral,' he

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said. 'I want masses and masses and masses of flowers.' And then he began to cough.

### § III

The mention of Ned Lathom, and of Noel Coward singing that song in the golden music-room, makes me realize how impossible it is, in a work of this nature, to attempt to keep the narrative in any sort of chronological order. For Noel's name conjures up all sorts of gay episodes which should really be placed in the distant future. And I want to write them down before I forget them.

It ought to be easy to write about Noel. He is brilliant 'copy', always and everywhere. He invariably steals the show in life as well as in the theatre. This is not because he pushes himself forward — (though he in no way resembles a blushing violet — a sturdy and well-rooted zinnia would be more his typical flower); it is rather that he has an electric quality that he is temperamentally incapable of dimming. When Noel at last passes from this world, which I trust will be in the very distant future, it is to be hoped that those responsible for the disposal of his remains will act with special caution. Wherever he is buried there will be every possibility of high jinks in the churchyard for years to come. Noel dead is likely to be a good deal more volatile than — well, we will name no names.

And yet it happens to be extremely difficult to write about him. ('Then why try, my dear Beverley?') For precisely that reason; his blithe spirit is constantly interrupting. Weeks after one has met him he lingers in the air — not like a strange and delicate perfume — no, not at all like that, but like a pungent antiseptic. He debunks at long distance. He is debunking me at this very moment, though I am in London and he is ninety miles away at Saint Margaret's Bay. And even as I write, I find myself emitting a faint snort of laughter at his description of his house there. It is right on the sea, indeed, it is almost *in* it, and '... it is all very exhilarating, my dear Beverley, because the mines drift by like confetti'.

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Yet I propose to write about him, even if it hurts, because I have three qualifications for doing so. I have known him for twenty-five years; I have a fervent but not entirely non-critical admiration for his genius; and — oddly enough — I am not jealous of him. Maybe this last qualification is the most important of all. Probably no other man living — certainly no other man of the theatre — has innocently brought into existence so large and varied an assortment of green-eyed monsters. If Noel were ever to meet with disaster we should see a pretty pack yapping at his heels.

Which reminds me . . .

### § I V

Precisely twenty-six years ago, Noel was sitting in his dressing-room, reading an anonymous letter. Like most anonymous letters, it stank. (I mean this literally — not in the American sense; there is a foetid and odious perfume that drifts up from these accursed bulletins.) The letter was from a fellow dramatist — you can all have a guess at *that* one — and it expressed the writer's exultation that Noel's first play, 'I'll Leave it to You', had been a flop. 'You-little-whippersnapper-how-dare-you-barge-in-go-home-and-eat-some-worms.' That was the theme. (It always is.) It was signed — 'A dramatist who knows his bus . . .' (The notepaper was mean and inadequate, and there was no room to write 'business'.)

Noel stared at the letter. Outside, on the notice board, the wind flapped a melancholy slip that announced, to the ladies and gentlemen of the company, the imminent interment of his hopes. It was not a very pleasant moment, but it was a very important one; because it made him tough. Noel is the very last person to attach undue significance to transitory episodes; it is quite impossible to imagine him writing the 'she-gave-me-a-look-and-I-was-never-the-same-again' sort of stuff. (The giver of the look would be more likely to suffer a permanent metamorphosis.) So when he says that this letter was really important — that it produced a grim smile and 'I'll-damn-well-show-the-

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world' attitude — we may presume that he is stating a fact.

Of the toughness, at any rate, there can be no question. It is modified, of course, by a natural tenderness, which it is fashionable to call sentimentality. But the toughness is the main core of his work; it is as though somebody were delivering a shatteringly sophisticated monologue against a soft-pedalled background of wistful minor chords. And the most memorable of my many encounters with Noel have always resolved themselves into a duel between his detestation of illusions and my own desire to cherish them — (if it is an illusion to go on clinging, rather breathlessly, to one's belief in the love of God and the loveliness of man).

Some of these memories have as their background the Ivy Restaurant. The Ivy really deserves a chapter to itself; it is unique in London and maybe in the world. Its patrons have the same sort of *cachet* as the Algonquin in New York and the Café Flore in Paris, though they are, generally speaking, much nicer than the persons who frequent the former and much cleaner than the persons who frequent the latter. The food is far superior to the Algonquin's, unless you like prawns frozen into a state of stunned anonymity. Noel dedicated 'Bitter Sweet' to Abel, the proprietor, who used to let him run up bills when he was struggling and unsuccessful. I always mean to dedicate something to Mario, who was once Abel's partner, though now — alas! — he has taken himself and his genius to the Caprice. Mario's smile, and his *paté maison*, have seen me through many a dark hour.

One night, as I walked from my club to the Ivy through the rain, the newspaper placards bore the headlines 'French Rail Disaster — 50 Dead'. It was a grim story. A band of pilgrims had been on their way to Lourdes. Among them was a party of Franciscan monks, most of whom were in the first two carriages. When the train was only an hour from its destination, it had run off the lines and plunged into a ravine. The first two carriages were crushed to pulp. The men of God never reached the city of God; they lay, bloody and mangled, under the searchlights.



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I entered the restaurant. It was warm and cosy; there were flowers on the tables; I had a cocktail; the memory of the tragedy receded. (I am no better than my fellows, and anyway, if one were to attempt to carry the world's pain on one's shoulders, one would be crushed in a few seconds.) When suddenly I saw Noel. He was sitting in a far corner; he looked unusually flushed and tense; and he beckoned to me.

I went over.

'You and your monks!' He had the evening paper before him, and he tapped it angrily. 'A *very* pretty little story, Beverley.'

I stared at him in astonishment.

He continued . . . 'Perhaps the ironic element is *slightly* overstressed?'

'What *are* you talking about, Noel?'

He ignored me. 'If *I* had been writing the story I think I should have been content with just *two* monks. Two nice rather dim old creatures, who had nothing much to live for. And I should have provided them with a conveniently incurable disease, which would have rounded everything off very nicely. But then, of course, I'm not God. I'm not the Great Story Teller!'

He glared at me with something very like hostility.

'Anybody would think . . .' I began — with the intention of saying that 'anybody would think I was personally responsible for the tragedy'.

He interrupted me. 'Anybody would think, my *dear* Beverley, that your God was a bad artist. An atrocious artist. But as that might seem blasphemous let's just agree that He moves in a mysterious way. A very mysterious way. Almost as mysterious as Mr. George Jean Nathan — with whom, judging from his recent articles — He has much in common.'

And that was that. I retired, considerably damped, to deal with a *lobster cardinale*, which seemed, somehow, to have lost its savour.

That must be enough of Noel for the moment. Doubtless he will dance across our pages again. Meanwhile, there are many other figures of the mid-'twenties awaiting our attention.

I seem to see them dressed in white, in frosty immobility against a white screen. Why white? Because that was the period's distinctive hue. And the person who was most responsible for this fashion, which later became a craze, was Syrie Maugham, the wife of W. Somerset Maugham.

Syrie was probably the first of England's interior decorators who was also 'in society' — to use a period phrase. In America, of course, they had long been accustomed to that sort of thing. Elsie de Woolf, for example, who made a fortune in decoration, was undoubtedly a lady, even when she was in Europe. And if you are a lady in Europe you can hardly avoid being a *grande dame* in America. But in England there was still a remote reproach in the word 'trade', there was still a faint feeling that one could not dine with people one day and do business with them the next.

Syrie put an end to all that nonsense, and a very good thing too, for she had delicious taste. But though she had a most delicate sense of colour, her greatest triumphs, as I have hinted, were won in pure white. She performed miracles with whites and off-whites, and creams and ivories, and the palest oyster-greys. It is fashionable, nowadays, to scoff at this vogue; it is called bloodless, anaemic, fatigued. To me it had — and has — a perennial charm.

Her own house, at 117 King's Road, Chelsea, was as pretty as a narcissus in the snow, as pretty as the silver feathers on a pane of winter glass. The adjective 'pretty' is also dated. It has become almost a term of reproach; to say that a picture is pretty is to stamp it as second-rate. Why? It is such a gay and blossoming word, it flutters over the page like a butterfly, alighting on the minor beauties of the world. The lyrics of Herrick are pretty, and Cecil Beaton's spangled setting to 'Lady Windermere's Fan'; the pictures of Marie Laurencin,

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and the gold and enamel boxes of Fabergé. One cannot live always on the mountain-tops of Beauty with a capital 'B'; there are so many pretty blossoms dotting the slopes below.

Syrie knew the secret of this inspired prettiness, and at 117 King's Road one found it in its finest flower. Were I painting an impressionist picture of the great room on the ground floor, which was the centre of the house, and indeed, its *raison d'être*, I would begin with an immense screen that stood in the far corner. It was fashioned from hundreds of strips of mirror, and always in front of it there were great bunches of white flowers — madonna lilies, peonies with their tousled heads, lilacs as thick as cream, foxgloves, looking strangely sophisticated in this unusual setting. The flowers seemed to dance in recurrent rhythms as one moved round the room.

Against the white walls stood a few pieces of 'pickled' furniture, as elegantly disposed as the minor characters in a ballet. Syrie was a prize 'pickler'. She loved pale, naked woods, stripped of their veneer, showing the lovely pattern of the grain. Nothing pleased her more than to find some piece that had been smothered in paint or varnish, and to plunge it into the pickling bath, from which it emerged looking as she — and possibly, though not probably, God — had intended.

### § V I

Gruff old men in clubs will tell you that in those days of the roaring 'twenties there was no 'society'; anybody could go anywhere. Even the clubs were no longer what they were. In the old days a hostess who wanted a number of young men for a dance could send a round robin to the St. James's and she could be sure that the people who turned up would be presentable. Now — heaven knows what she would get if she were so rash as to attempt such an experiment. Something quite indescribable might come along — (probably me).

The old men may have been right; never having been very social I am not in a position to judge. It is probably true to say

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that even in those days there remained very few ladies who were fitted, either by birth or by stature, to stand at the top of a staircase, receiving royalty; and even those who were so fitted had usually no staircase left to stand up in. Among the exceptions was Lady Londonderry. Nobody who ever went to a reception at Londonderry House is ever likely to forget it. There was drama about it — and curiously enough, a sense of power, stability and permanence. The antics of café society often conjure up visions of revolution; the sight of quantities of over-dressed *arrivistes* misconducting themselves in public makes one conscious of the tenuous nature of the economic ice on which they are dancing; there is a hint of the tumbril in the roll of the drum. But in a party at Londonderry House the uproar of the common world was muffled, and even such sounds as sometimes echoed from outside must have been reassuring to those who desired the continuance of the *status quo*; they must have found solid comfort in the rich baritone of the linkman's voice, echoing out into the violet darkness of Park Lane, primrose-spangled with the street-lamps: 'Her Grace the Duchess of Sutherland's car . . . His Highness the Aga Khan's car . . .' and then, perhaps on a less exultant note: 'Taxi for Mr. Ramsay MacDonald.' But although Lady Londonderry's genuine esteem for such men as the Labour Prime Minister made her the target for much ill-informed criticism, the linkmen did not often have to proclaim the arrival of the vulgar. The great procession, as it moved slowly up the staircase, was like a parade of history — of history, too, in its most glittering pages, history that still sparkled in many a brilliant necklace, many a fabulous ornament that had been, as often as not, the legacy, direct or indirect, of a distant battle on land or sea.

I did not spend much of my time going to such parties, for which I was fitted neither by birth nor by inclination, and my first instinct, when receiving cards which bore that sinister little word 'decorations' in the left-hand corner, was usually to think up a prior engagement. But I am glad that I went out now and then. Memory is, in its way, a standard of values; when I listen, nowadays, to the conversation of some woman who is reputed

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to be a wit I can conjure up the figure of Margot Oxford, flitting across her drawing-room in Bedford Square, arranging great bowls of yellow chrysanthemums, pecking at them nervously as though she bore the blossoms some personal grudge and keeping up, all the time, an acid, crackling commentary on her contemporaries and, of course, on herself. (It was in my presence that she first made the immortal remark about her own face: 'I haven't got a face, I've only got two profiles stuck together.')

And when I hear that some woman is a 'great Bohemian', and study her feeble little efforts to qualify for citizenship in that land of allegory, I think of the Baroness d'Erlanger, to whom I was later to dedicate one of my books, in words which I think were pretty and were certainly apposite: 'To Marie Rose Antoinette Catherine de Robert d'Aqueria de Rochegude d'Erlanger, whose charms are as gay and as numerous as her names.' They were. Tall and statuesque, with marvellous eyes, there was yet, if she will forgive me for saying so, something faintly raffish about her. Perhaps it was her flaming red hair which gave this impression. At times, this hair was crowned by a superb tiara of emeralds, which was usually more than a little crooked, because she had stuck it on at random as she hurried across the great hall of her house in Piccadilly. Catherine was always too busy for things like tiaras. There were her paintings, for example, which occupied the whole of the top floor — strange, rather flat portraits that reflected her love of the Byzantine and, oddly enough, were often uncannily 'like'. (I have even seen her painting in the small hours of the morning with a smock hastily thrown over her gown and the tiara still dangling over the nape of her neck.) She had caused a vast wire net to be spread over the well of the staircase on the top floor, so that when her studio became too full she could throw things on to it without cluttering up the floor. Sometimes the things which she threw were so small that they slipped through the wire and fell down four flights on to the astonished heads of her guests. There was one unfortunate occasion when a large tube of crimson lake hurtled down from the heavens, to splash

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like blood on the shirt of an extremely nervous South American ambassador.

There was never a dull moment with Catherine; to call on her was a challenge to adventure. Anything might happen. For instance, you might find yourself whirling off in a Rolls Royce to North London, to explore those magic acres of open stalls in the Caledonian Market, where the street traders offered anything from a dented saucepan to a baroque garden fountain. Catherine, being a Frenchwoman, was a shrewd bargain-hunter, though perhaps not quite as shrewd as she imagined. For though the Rolls Royce was always carefully hidden in a side street, and though an old mackintosh was always draped around her, to give a suitable impression of impecuniosity, she could never quite divest herself of an air of *luxe*. Even if she did not betray herself physically (as when an inch or two of sable protruded beneath the folds of the mackintosh), she betrayed herself spiritually. Whatever she wore and wherever she went she was *grande dame*.

At the market she was in her element. She bought the most extraordinary things. She could never resist a chandelier, even if it was broken and falling to pieces. Some of my most hilarious memories of Catherine are driving back to Piccadilly down the bumpy streets of the Camden Road, crouching on a back seat surrounded by an immense bouquet of glass, which jingled and jangled at every jolt, causing startled passers-by to jump as though they had just collided with a lamp-post. Once home, the lustres were carried in basketfuls up to the top floor, and deposited on a small and ever-growing mountain of glass which one day she was going to turn into a series of perfect chandeliers. I don't think she ever realized this ambition. The nearest she got to it was just before the war. At that time, when everybody else was thinking about black-out curtains, Catherine perversely surrounded all her windows with glittering chains of crystal. It was delicious, mad and typical.

I seem to have suggested that she was only bizarre; she was not; these baroque twists in her conduct were the ornaments in a personality and an intelligence that was finely designed.

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On many occasions I have found myself in Venice in the company of persons whose opinions I respect; but never till I stayed with Catherine in her palazzo on the Riva degli Schiavone did I feel that I was with somebody who was, by right, a Venetian. True, even here, there were eccentricities; outside the entrance to the palazzo, for instance, there were two superb urns which one felt, should either have been left empty or planted with myrtle — or, if one were in a gala mood, with scarlet oleanders. Catherine, with infinite trouble, obtained a small packet of grass seed from Woolworths and scattered it in the urns. As she forgot to water it, not very much of it came up, but the few blades which survived gave her the greatest satisfaction. 'In Venice, my dear Beverley,' she would say, 'a little grass is worth its weight in gold.'

There are no Catherine d'Erlangers today. And though she is still beautiful, still radiantly alive, she now lives in Hollywood. And Hollywood is very far, in every sense of the word, from Venice.

Is it senility, creeping on apace, that invests such figures in my mind with a special lustre? I wonder. Perhaps we shall find the answer to that question in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### A VOICE THERE BREATHED

I KEEP trying to go forward, to push beyond the year 1925. But always some charming ghost catches me by the arm, forcing me to pause and gossip, and time stands still.

And now, instead of advancing, I must retreat even further, to the year 1923. For I want to tell the strange story of how I met the late Dame Nellie Melba. I can console myself by the thought that as the tale of our long friendship unfolds itself we shall, at last, step a little nearer to the present day.

Melba, now, is only a name to most young people, and in America she would not be even a name if it were not for *pêche Melba*. (I have often seen her in a tornado of temper, and the fiercest was when she opened an anonymous letter from Chicago containing the acid comment: 'It's only the peaches that have kept *you* going. Yours sincerely, Ada Brown.')

Yet Melba's fame, at its height, was certainly as widespread as that of Caruso, Patti or Jenny Lind; and *their* legend still persists even above the roar of the jitterbugs. We may learn, any day, that some peroxide horror has been offered a million dollars to make a film of the life of Patti, squawking the mad scene from Lucia against a technicolored reproduction of Vesuvius. But nobody is likely to make a film about Melba. For which, in all humility, I thank God.

There is a divinity about a great soprano; it is quite unmistakable, for those who have ears to hear, and it does not exist in the modern world.

This is one of the few artistic matters about which it is impossible to argue. It is not a matter of opinion; it is a matter of fact.

Melba had this divinity; so had Patti; so in a minor degree had Tetrizzini; so had Galli-Curci, even when she was singing out of tune, which was on every day of the year except the second Tuesday in Lent. Elizabeth Schumann has *not* this



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divinity; she is a far finer artist — granted — but she is not of Olympic blood. Nor is Flagstad, nor Lily Pons, nor any of the rest of them.

Melba was 'divine' — in the original meaning of the word, even when she was singing a scale in her bath.

One of the most dramatic proofs I ever had of this rare quality was given by a dim old record of Patti singing 'Home Sweet Home'. It is in the gramophone library of the B.B.C. Patti made it when the gramophone was very much in its infancy and she was very much in the reverse; she was, to be precise, sixty-eight. Yet as soon as the first notes of the voice emerged through the scratches one knew that one was in the presence of the supernatural. The voice was sheer gold — sunshine slanting through clouds. It was beyond all argument, above all analysis. Most of all, it was of a quality — like Melba's — that could not be compared. You do not *compare* goddesses with ordinary mortals; there are no standards by which to do so. Therefore, he would be a fool who attempted to *compare* Melba with any singer alive today. She was not 'better' or 'worse'; she was totally and eternally different. And even if Schumann — (whose exquisite artistry would make me gladly follow her ten miles in a fog, any night) — even if Schumann were to sing for a thousand years, she could never make the same incomparable *sounds* as Melba for ten seconds. For those sounds were not of this world. It would be pleasant to think that they might be of the next.

### § 11

At the age of seven I artlessly produced a shrewd critique of Melba's voice. She had come to give a concert at our hometown, Torquay, and I had climbed the railings and scaled a high wall to hear her. When I returned home from my escapade I said 'She sings exactly like *me*'. I trust that this remark will not seem too offensive. I had a rather sensational treble, and could rattle off quantities of the elaborate traditional cadenzas from such ancient and forgotten operas as 'Les Perles de Brésil'.

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{It is a pity that no living soprano ever attempts the charming 'Couplets du Mysoli' from this faded masterpiece.)

The criticism was shrewd because Melba's was the voice of a boy rather than of a woman. It was to this child-like, sexless quality that I afterwards referred in the novel *Evensong* which created such a furore in her homeland, Australia, that effigies of me were burned in the streets of Sydney. This is the passage in question:

And then the voice came. It stole through the room like a spirit . . . there was a sense that some radiant and exquisite child had come to them from another world, and was unfolding silver scrolls of song on whose pages the pale notes glittered. Oh, the futility of words, of printed words, that flutter like dead leaves in the breath of that voice! And yet the voice, even in memory, compels those words to flutter from the lips of all those who heard her — compels the one to compare it to a flower unfolding, the other to a moonbeam dancing — and will compel all men in whose ears it echoed to search their souls for metaphors, until the last echo in the last song is stilled and even the memories of that beauty which she created are lost in the ultimate silence.

It seems odd that one should be burned in effigy for writing words like that about a woman, even if one also showed that she was human. But then, I have never understood the critics.

### § III

It was a murder that brought us together.

The year was 1923, and the whole of England was following with breathless excitement the course of the Thompson-Bywaters trial.<sup>1</sup> It had almost everything, from the journalistic point of view, that the public seek in a first-class murder — violence, mystery and a plentiful dose of sex. To me it was a long-drawn agony; to the end of my life I shall be haunted by the

<sup>1</sup> I have written a full account of this remarkable case in *Twenty-Five*, (Jonathan Cape).

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memory of the terror in Edith Thompson's eyes. However, as a working reporter, I had to be in the thick of it, and one of my jobs, apart from reporting the trial, was to persuade various celebrities to give their views on the case, and, if possible, to put their names to articles about it — (written, of course, by myself).

One day, my editor proclaimed:

'What we want is the *woman's angle*.'

(Oh — that old 'woman's angle', so dear to the editorial mind! Why must the 'woman's angle' always be so much more saleable than the 'man's angle'? Why this idiotic intellectual segregation of the sexes?)

'Who can we get to give us the woman's angle?' he demanded, fixing me with a beady eye.

I happened, at that moment, to glance at one of the news pages of the *Daily Mail*, which contained an announcement of a Melba night at Covent Garden. For lack of anything better to say I murmured 'Melba?' It seemed about as foolish a suggestion as one could make, even in an editorial sanctum. For it is difficult to see any obvious connection between the art of *bel canto*<sup>1</sup> and the soul of a murderess.

However, the suggestion met with instant approval. 'That's got it!' cried the Editor. 'We women — and Edith Thompson! By Dame Nellie Melba!' He banged his first on the table. 'Get busy!'

In the usual daze, the usual state of embarrassment and apprehension, I got busy. I scrambled about with telephone books, *Who's Whos*, bundles of press-cuttings, trying to locate her. At the end of a morning's hard work I found that she was staying at the Empress Club in Dover Street. I put through a call, contacted her secretary and was told politely to go to hell. I went round to the club with a personal note and received the same message. In the meantime I sent a telegram, which was not answered.

<sup>1</sup> *Bel Canto*, as a matter of passing interest, was the title given to the German edition of *Evensong*, which, with most of my other German translations, was afterwards banned by Hitler.

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By six o'clock I was desperate. We had nothing for the leader-page that week, and the editor was counting on me. So I decided on a *risque-tout* policy, and went out determined, by fair means or foul, to meet Melba face to face.

The Empress Club in Dover Street is very 'exclusive', both socially and sexually. It is a purely feminine institution, and since its members are mostly elderly and nearly all distinguished the few males who enter it are equally elderly and distinguished. I was neither. So when I arrived at the entrance I paused, and glanced through the glass doorway as though waiting for a friend. The commissionaire gave me a suspicious glare. He did not look as though one could tip him, nor was he the sort who would be prone to gossip. He would surely have barred my way and asked my business, but at that moment a sabled female emerged and sent him scurrying for a taxi. It was now or never. I pushed open the door, and walked boldly past the reception desk. By a merciful providence the clerk's back was turned; the staircase lay ahead; and in a few seconds I had mounted it and stood panting on the first floor.

Now what?

The complete folly of my plan became apparent. In all probability Melba was out, or in one of the reception rooms, or even in the crowded lounge below, at which I had only taken a hurried glance. Even if she were in her room, I had no idea of the number nor the floor, and even if I were to ascertain it, I could hardly barge in without an appointment. In the meantime, at any moment a servant might appear and ask my business, or a door might open to reveal a member who would start some sort of alarm, and I should be placed in a ridiculous and humiliating position. Compared with the stark and deadly dilemmas which have been the daily lot of the modern younger generation, my embarrassment must seem trivial. But it was genuine enough at the moment.

I walked along the corridor. Nothing happened. A staircase lay ahead. I walked up it and made the circuit of the second floor. Still nothing. Another staircase . . . another corridor . . . and then, miracle of miracles . . . the Voice.

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It echoed, very faintly, through a door that lay at the extreme end of the passage. Hardly believing my good luck, I tiptoed nearer. This was the sort of coincidence for which journalists pray all their lives. But by the time I reached the door, I had forgotten all about journalism, all about everything except the Voice. It seemed then, as it has always seemed since — long after she is dead, even through the frayed veil of the gramophone — less like a sound than a light, a silver beam of light that hovered in the air, tracing patterns of unearthly beauty.

She was singing the addio from *Bohème* — the aria which of all others I associate with her most intimately, and which, in the years to come, I was to hear her sing more times than I can remember. Long afterwards, at the end of a strange and wonderful night, when she had sung one of her many farewells, she was to stand in her dressing-room, a tired old woman, with diamonds blazing round her neck, against a background of orchids and lilies and red roses; and she was to send everyone out of her dressing-room so that she might speak to me alone.

‘Beverley,’ she said, ‘I want you to make me a promise.’

‘What is it?’

‘I want you to promise never to hear any other woman sing *Bohème*.’

There were a number of replies I could have made . . . polished, flattering, as a courtier might reply to a queen. But I could only mutter: ‘I promise.’

For a moment she said nothing; I had a fear that she would break down; her lips were tight set and her eyes stared straight ahead, as though she were searching the future and found it bleak. But the old Melba quality triumphed.

‘That’s that,’ she snapped. And then — on an ascending scale, like an angry thrush — ‘For God’s sake, where’s my maid?’

However all those things lay far ahead. We must return to that moment when I stood, young and inky and irresponsible, worshipping outside the door of her room.

ADDIO . . . SENZA RANCOR

The silver light faded in an incomparable diminuendo.

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Suddenly, the door opened. I found myself blinking into the startled face of a middle-aged woman. And I heard the Voice demand, in tones that were far from silver:

‘Who the devil are *you*?’

### § I V

Melba introduced me to a new world, or rather, to a very old world. Just as Ned Lathom had given me my first glimpse of the sparkling, sequined crew who danced over the borders of Mayfair into the blue lights of Bohemia, just as Mrs. Greville was later to introduce me into a soberer and far more solid society, where a dinner-table could be, and often was, a centre of power-politics, so Melba, with a gesture, swept me back into the world of the Edwardians.

It was a peculiar experience for a very young man. I imagine that there can be nobody of my age or upbringing who has spent so many hours in small, shiny cabriolets, almost stifled under a mountain of sable rugs, listening to gossip about famous beauties who, if they were not actually in the grave, were sitting very close to the edge. They became so familiar to me, these ghosts, that I could only think of them by their Christian names. There was ‘darling Gladys’ — pronounced Glaydis, who was the famous Lady de Grey, the adored of Jean de Reszke, and one of the last great leaders of London society. Lady de Grey sounded quite fabulous; she combined beauty and power with a sort of lofty naughtiness which must have been irresistible. My favourite story about her is laid in Paris. One night she had a whim to visit a quarter which was not at all the sort of quarter to be visited by ladies, in those prim days. There was no question of going in disguise; her height, her beauty, her breeding were not to be hidden under any conventional cloak. So what must be done? Obviously, the streets must be railed off, the French police must be called into service, and — for as long as the mood of naughtiness endured — the quarter in question must be the private preserve of her

ladyship. Which was exactly what happened. To me, this is enchanting; it has the authentic ring of 1789.

Then there was Alfred de Rothschild — all gilt and plush and glamour, a sort of aesthetic Jew Süss, who used to pay Melba £1000 for a few songs after dinner, and having paid it, would take back the cheque, reinvest the proceeds, and return it to her a few weeks later, doubled. She often used to quote to me his favourite remark: 'I made my money by selling too soon.' I have often recalled it — too late.

Nor can I forget 'darling Flo' who, as Mrs. Hwfa Williams, was best known to the world as one of King Edward's favourite hostesses. Darling Flo was something of a poppet, and I used to like going down to her house at Coombe, where, across the smooth-shaven lawns, the royal figure had so frequently stalked. She was — or seemed to me — immensely old, she was almost stone deaf, and she was invariably in a state of chronic impecuniosity. In spite of these drawbacks she was as gay as a cricket. She always talked a weird sort of Italian baby-language which she had made popular in Edwardian society (you can hear echoes of it in Vita Sackville-West's brilliant period-piece *The Edwardians*). Instead of saying: 'I am tired', she would say 'Flo is fatigato'. Her husband was always called 'Grey mousey'. And 'grey mousey' was often extremely 'fatigato', particularly when the bailiffs were drawing near.

'Millie' (Duchess of Sutherland), 'Feo' (Lady Alington), 'darling Daisy' (the Princess of Pless), and of course 'Alice' (the Hon. Mrs. George Keppel), I came to know them all, by proxy. And, on the whole, I rather liked them. But I would not have listened so attentively to the stories about them if I had not realized there was money in them.

Melba, I decided, must write her autobiography, or rather, must permit me to write it for her. Her brain was a treasure-house of the sort of material for which editors, as Fleet Street had taught me, were prepared to pay through the nose. Hers was still a great name in England and America; the gossipy autobiography was at its highest peak of popularity; all I had to do was to take down these stories as she told them at the

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dinner-table, string them together, sprinkle them with an appropriate coating of sugar — for it was essential, if we were to obtain really large figures for the serial rights, that the central figure should be presented, not only with a golden voice but also with a golden heart — and then, take them into the market to seek the highest bidder.

There was only one drawback to my plan. Melba was sixty; she was touchy about her age; and when I first outlined the plan to her, she reacted unfavourably.

‘It’s a little early for *that!*’ she snapped. ‘Anybody would think I was a hundred.’

‘But people write their autobiographies at any age.’

‘Not *me*. I know what people would say.’

So did I. They were already saying it. But I also knew that if I could present her with a *fait accompli*, the glamour of appearing in the role of authoress would be irresistible. And so, a few months later, when she suddenly cabled from Australia asking me to go out to help her run her farewell opera season, I accepted.

It was to prove one of the major follies in a life that has been full of folly. But at the time it seemed a sensible thing to do, in spite of the arrival of a number of anonymous letters kindly suggesting that I must be her lover.

### § v

As a rule, any major move in the life of a writer provides him with ‘copy’. From the stimulus of new sights and sounds the brain creates new patterns, or rather, it rearranges the old ones; for art is only the extension of the artist’s personality in various forms of fancy dress. And one would have thought that a young writer, when handed a large continent for his inspection, would have been able to extract from it at least the material for an occasional short story.

But Australia gave me nothing — literally nothing, probably because I saw it through the bars of such a very gilded cage. Not that the continent has ever been a major source of inspira-



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tion to the artist. Apart from that solitary and neglected masterpiece, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, by Henry Handel Richardson, Australia has always proved as arid in inspiration as its own deserts. True, there is D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, but even Lawrence's most hysterical disciples have never claimed for it much merit. As for painting, there is Hans Heysen, who plays pleasantly with the lights and shades of the ubiquitous gum tree. I have a pretty Hans Heysen that hangs in my study; I know of no other Australian artist worthy to hang beside him.

I hasten to add that I have no right to lay down the law, as I never saw the real Australia. Travelling through the continent with Melba was like travelling through France with Marie Antoinette; on the few occasions when it was possible to peer through the windows of the barouche a jewelled hand was laid on one's arm, demanding attention. There were momentary glimpses that I had — in periods of escape — which were stimulating and suggestive. I remember, for instance, a long, rough bar in Perth, with shavings on the wooden floor, filled with crude angular figures that had drifted in from the bush. It was a holiday; they were all in black, with sweeping black sombreros, swilling tumblers of whisky, cursing each other in their broad Australian accent — of all human intonations the most repulsive. This picture never fades; it has the sharpness and precision of a drawing by Cruikshank, to whose period it seems to belong. And though it is only a pin-point on the canvas of memory it has that luminous quality which might one day glow into a story.

There were glimpses, too, of startling natural beauty. From time to time I managed to escape to the woods when the mimosas were in bloom. (It is characteristic of Australia that the lovely word 'mimosa', as light and feathery as the flower it celebrates, has been nationally rejected in favour of the ugly 'wattle', which sounds like a kitchen utensil.) The time of the mimosas is Australia's *heure exquise*; it brings to the traveller the same sort of rapture as when, in the Holy Land, he finds whole hill-sides draped with the scarlet cloak of anemones, or

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when in Northern Bengal he walks under trees whose branches are laden, as by snow, with shining hosts of wild white orchids. The time of the mimosas is a time of light; the countless shades of yellow seem to blend into one great festival of sunshine; and as the wind blows through these winding, golden galleries, as a million silver leaves turn and flutter against a sky of pellucid blue, one is very near to heaven.

But such moments were few and far between. For ninety-nine hours out of the hundred I was chained to Melba's side, endeavouring to keep within reasonable bounds a temperament which grew more and more explosive as the opening of the opera season approached.

Perhaps I had better say a word about the background. We lived at Coombe Cottage, with a family background of George (her son), and his wife and daughter. Coombe was a pleasant, rambling building in the Colonial style, about twenty miles from Melbourne. I have a memory of tall, airy rooms, with highly polished floors in which one could see reflected the sparkle of the chandeliers. There was some good Louis Seize furniture, and a couple of Mason and Hamlin grand pianos, which were a constant source of joy. There were also a couple of English footmen, who were not a constant source of joy, because they hated each other and were always complaining of 'the 'eat'. Melba doted on one of them, oddly enough, because he looked so dissipated. 'William looks so *pale*,' she used to say to me. 'So distinguished!' And then she would exercise her ingenuity in inventing all sorts of reasons why William presented this appearance.

I could find nothing in the Australian bush — by which we were entirely surrounded — which was likely to make *me* look very pale, still less very distinguished, and perhaps this was the source of my general *malaise*. I was bored to distraction, particularly at nights. We would come back from a day's rehearsal in which everything had gone wrong... ('that trombone, my dear, ought to be *deported*... I refuse to believe that he doesn't do it on purpose')... and after a very heating dinner, often in solitude, we would sit down to a game of

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dominoes. Outside there was the lush Australian night, with all its purple shadows, and occasionally, from the distance, would come the call of a laughing jackass — which, in moments of especial bitterness I felt should be turned into Australia's national anthem. Mingled with this sound, from time to time, would come other sounds, human sounds, female sounds, to put it bluntly, shrieks — suggesting that William was up to something that would make him look even more pale and distinguished in the morning. And there we sat, playing dominoes.

'Was it for this,' I asked myself — placing a six-five against her double six, and thereby relieving myself of a potential debt of elevenpence — 'was it for this that I became President of the Oxford Union?' (More shrieks from the bush.) 'Was it for this that as a schoolboy I sat up late at night under a placard traced with my own hand announcing the fact that "Bismarck used to work till dawn"?' (A positive fusillade of shrieks from the bush, drawing from Melba the observation that: 'William obviously has good blood.')

However, it was too late to draw back now. Besides, my main object in coming to Australia, to write Melba's autobiography, was slowly but surely accomplishing itself. I had managed to overcome her opposition, partly by enlarging on the wonderful publicity she would get, but mainly by persuading her that the book would not be classed as 'Autobiography' but as 'Memoirs'. And though an 'autobiography' might be very ageing — indeed, an open confession of senility, a book of 'memoirs' was a sign of vitality, of positive sprightliness. Besides, I pointed out, it might be very profitable for her, as I was to do all the work and she was to take half the proceeds.<sup>1</sup>

She had curious ideas of what might interest the public. When I asked her to give me a few frank words about Tetrizini, whom she detested and despised, she waved her hands and said:

<sup>1</sup> It was. When it was at last finished, under the title *Melodies and Memories*, the American magazine *Liberty* bought the serial rights for a sum which was not much for Melba, but was a lot for me.

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'Say she was a charming artist! A *delicious* artist!'

I pointed out that only yesterday Melba had said that she looked like a cook and faked all her top notes.

'I can't *possibly* say things like that. I must be *generous*.'

'Then what shall we say about Caruso?'

'Say he was a charming artist! A great voice! A *superb* voice!'

'But what about his habit of squeaking rubber balls in your car when you were dying in the last act of *Bohème*?'

'Really! I couldn't say such things! So vulgar!'

And so it went on. Everybody had to go down as charming and delicious, whatever her true opinion of them might be. I felt that this was carrying the golden-hearted pose to extremes; nevertheless, I stuck to it manfully.

But one night I felt that I had had enough. It had been a particularly wearing day; she had indulged in a new wig for the role of Desdemona, and at the matinée it had kept on slipping over her forehead, stifling her, and making the final attentions of Othello almost superfluous. In addition, she had eaten a large and not quite ripe 'Grannie Smith' apple — 'so delicious, my dear Beverley, you do not eat nearly enough fruit' — and it was still — if the reader will forgive the word — 'repeating'. As a result, our dinner *à deux* had been a scowling and silent occasion, and afterwards she had flounced off to her room in a huff. No, she did *not* feel 'up to' dominoes.

So I too retired, to jot down the memoirs of the previous day, which had been a fairly fruitful one. But suddenly I could bear it no longer. I looked round the lonely bedroom with its incongruous French furniture, its tiny bookcase of volumes of operatic reminiscence, and its mantelpiece loaded with photographs of Edwardian musical celebrities . . . ('A ma chère Nellie — souvenirs d'Adieu — Tosti', 'A la voix de ma vie — Jean de Reszke', 'A tout jamais — Caruso') . . . and I said to myself: 'To hell with it all. I've had a life myself. It's as good as hers. It's better. It's gayer, livelier, more highly coloured. I'll write it!'

There and then, in my pyjamas, I went over to the desk —

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shook my fountain pen, which was empty, dipped it in the ink-pot which, naturally, like all ink-pots in the houses of prima donnas, was full of dust, iron filings and a quantity of lead pellets, seized a pencil, and wrote the first words of the first book which was to entitle me to join the rococo crowd that gains the eminence of *Who's Who*.

Twenty-five seems to me to be the latest age at which anybody should write an autobiography.

Yes — it was certainly a gesture of defiance. And maybe you who are reading these words will say that the young author was right, and that the first book of memoirs should also have been the last. But having started I cannot stop. The memories crowd too thickly about me.

CHAPTER V

EVENSONG

ONE day—it was Melba's birthday, and though she never told anybody her age, the anniversary always put her in a despairing mood—she said to me with a catch in her throat: 'You have never heard me sing.' It must have cost her a great deal to make that confession. She meant, of course, that I had never heard her in the days of her glory.

But I *was* to hear her in the days of her glory. I am not attempting a paradox; I am narrating a miracle.

It happened a year later, which means that we must now leave Australia—not, I should imagine, with much regret.

The miracle must wait for a moment, while I attempt to fill in the background.

I came back alone, via America, stayed long enough in New York to sell the memoirs to *Liberty*, and—which was more important in the long run—to sell *Twenty-Five* to George Doran. After which I returned to London, to my old job.

But not quite to my old job. Whatever Australia may not have done for me, it did at least give some power of self-assertion. One cannot live for half a year with a prima donna without a violent reaction. To everybody's surprise, including my own, I bounded into Northcliffe House like a lion, and asked Falk for a great deal more money than I had ever had before, got it, demanded to be made dramatic critic, and got that too.

'Soon you'll be showing us how to sing Faust,' observed Falk, grimly.

Bouncing out again, I gave notice to the landlady of my flat, and—fortified by the advance from *Liberty*—took a seven-year lease of an elegant little house in Westminster. As if that were not enough, I went out very early on the following

morning and bought a small motor-car. That is to say, I paid the first instalment on a pale blue Renault, which I had often admired in a shop in Pall Mall. I bought it solely for its colour; I knew nothing whatever about motor-cars, and to this day, if anything goes wrong with my car, I shut it up and walk away into the night. Only blankness and despair overcome me when I lift up that lid in front and peer into the awful interior.

When I first drove the car out, after six lessons, I drove, by mistake, into Trafalgar Square, and could not get out again. I went round and round, in slow and grinding circles, for over half an hour. On the second occasion, feeling more adept, I took my mother in it. I noticed with dismay that the front part seemed to be getting rather hot, so as a precaution I descended and took off the cap of the water tank. I have always felt about machines that, if given a chance, they will explode, and this seemed a proper precaution against the explosion which was imminent. When we started again, great spurts of rusty fluid deluged us.

As a final gesture I acquired a manservant, and this was one of the few gilt-edged investments I ever made. Reginald Arthur Gaskin is still with me, which probably says more for his sense of loyalty and friendship than for his business acumen; he is a bundle of talents, and if he chose to leave me, he would probably be running the Ritz before you could say 'knife'. He is, among other things, the best cook I ever encountered, and like all great artists, he seems to achieve his effects with a minimum of effort. He wanders out into the kitchen garden, followed by my Siamese cat, returns with a bundle of spinach — sniffing a rose *en route* — goes into the kitchen, flicks his fingers, and at precisely the right moment there is a spinach *soufflé* which would have given Brillat-Savarin quite a lot to think about. When he bottles fruit he does it casually, in an off moment, as it were, between puffs of a cigarette; but the result is a joy not only to the palate but to the eye; rows and rows of magic bottles in the larder, that gleam in the semi-darkness like jewels, and keep their summer tang even when the snow is piled thick on the roof. And my house, which is not

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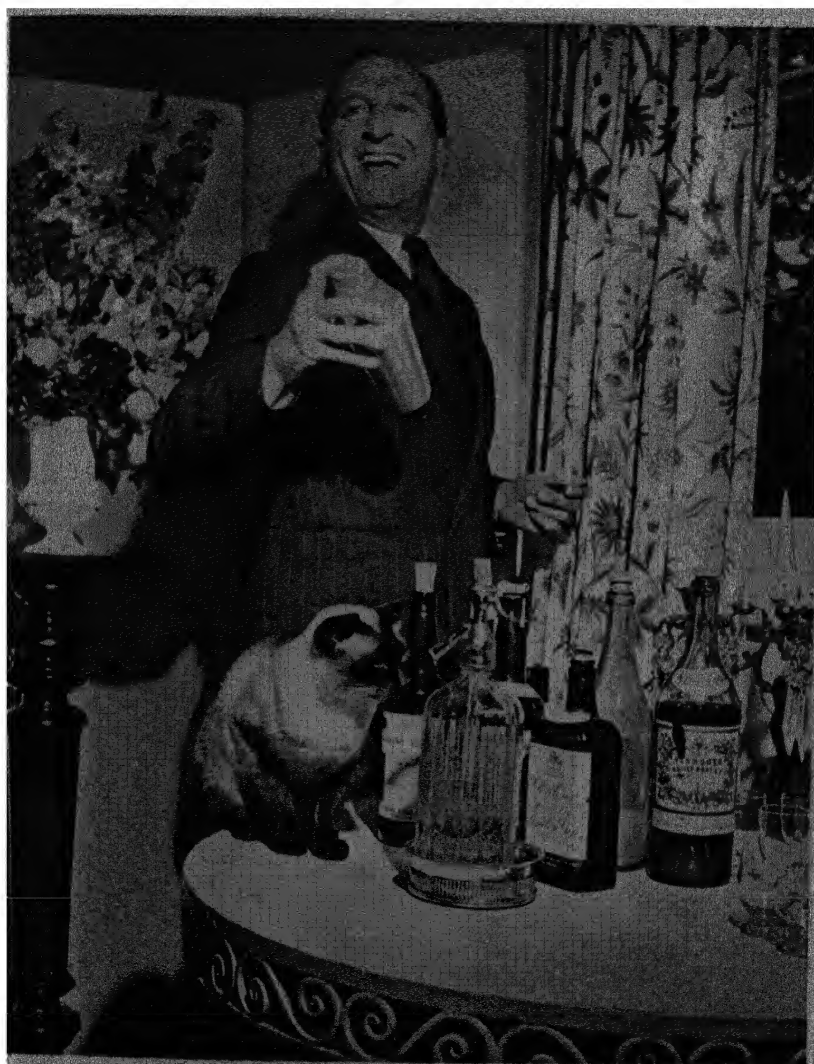
small, he manages as though it were a three-roomed flat, almost absent-mindedly; he always gives you a feeling that it is really all too simple, that warmth and comfort and beauty are to be had for the asking, or at most, for an hour or two of elegant and agreeable diversion.

Gaskin, in short, has brains. I am often poignantly reminded of this fact when I listen to him talking to my best women friends on the telephone; they seem quite put out when I interrupt. 'Excuse me, madame, here is Mr. Nichols,' says Gaskin, handing me the receiver. And a hurt voice at the other end says 'Oh, it's *you*! I was having such a lovely conversation with Gaskin.'

Ours is a partnership. At least, that is how I like to regard it. It is the sort of partnership which in this stiff-jointed era is difficult to classify. The bureaucrats would say that Gaskin would be more suitably employed running a chain of British restaurants, or training legions of Socialist housemaids, or lecturing to hideous people in municipal buildings about the three most disgusting ways of cooking cabbage. If he chose, he could shine in all these capacities. But he does not choose; he prefers to remain with me. Does the State thereby lose? I do not know, and I do not very much care.

A house — a car — a manservant; one was progressing. Sometimes, like all young men who earn their living by the pen, I had tremors of anxiety. I would pause at the front door, and stare up at the house, with its windows that had to be cleaned, its roof that had to be repaired, its rates that had to be paid, and I would think: 'All this, and the car, and Gaskin and heaven knows what else, has to come out of my head. I have no other means of support than selling words on paper. What will happen if one day the world will no longer pay for those words?' Then, as though to dispel these forebodings, a girl would dance down the street in a red hat, or a snatch of song would echo from a neighbouring window, and I would tell myself that the very thought of failure, now, was grotesque. The world was too full of 'a number of things', and I had no doubts of my capacity as a reporter.





GASKIN



## EVENSONG

### § II

And now we can tell the story of the 'miracle' which I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

Soon after returning to London I decided to take a short holiday in Venice. Australia had parched my mind; I wanted a deep draught of European civilization.

Hardly had I arrived, and established myself in a tiny apartment overlooking the Grand Canal, when a telegram came from Melba:

TOUGHED THOUGHT ARRIVING EXCELSIOR EARLY NEXT WEEK  
YOU MUST JOIN ME. •

The cryptic beginning of this message deserves a moment's explanation. Melba had a Scotch aversion to wasting money on telegrams; she would spend half an hour, as though she were doing a crossword puzzle, trying to delete unnecessary words. Sometimes she cut out so much that the telegram, when it arrived, was completely incomprehensible to its recipient, with the result that he or she had to send another telegram seeking an elucidation.

One day, in a moment of inspiration, she thought of the phrase 'Touched thought'. This, being interpreted, meant 'I am touched by your thought'.

'That says everything!' she cried, clapping her hands. 'Don't you agree?'

I did not. To me it had a slightly psychic echo, as though she had been fiddling about with ectoplasm, but naturally I did not say so.

So, in future 'touched thought' it was. Sometimes, in moments of expansion, it would become 'deeply touched thought', and occasionally, to persons of special importance, 'deeply touched your thought'.

One dreadful mishap resulted from this practice. Melba received a letter from a woman who had just arrived from Australia, asking her to dine on the same night. With the letter (as an excuse for the shortness of the invitation), was an

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immense basket of yellow orchids, which even in those days must have cost at least thirty guineas.

'I certainly shan't dine with that woman,' cried Melba, snatching the basket and hurrying it into the drawing-room. 'She's one of the people who say I drink. Send her a telegram — "Regret indisposed".'

I glanced at the glittering blaze of blossom. 'Oughtn't you to thank her for the flowers?'

Melba snorted. 'You can add "touched thought". It'll all come into twelve words.'

Although 'touched thought' at a penny a word, seemed a hardly adequate acknowledgment of thirty guineas' worth of superb *Cymbidiums*, these were the words which I sent over the telephone. Unfortunately, they were not the words which arrived at the other end.

Here is the telegram as it was actually delivered — to a woman, remember, who had made the suggestion that Melba drank (which was, of course, absurd).

### REGRET INDISPOSED TOUCHED PORT

Maybe that telegram was worth the *Cymbidiums*; she dined out on it for weeks.

## § III

I must apologize to the reader for the tardiness of the miracle. Here it is at last.

Melba arrived in great form, and in spite of my feeble protests I was swept out of my quiet apartment and transported to the Excelsior on the Lido. ('So much more healthy, my dear, all those mosquitoes. Who lent you the apartment? Catherine d'Erlanger? Well — what can you expect?')

The connection between the Baroness d'Erlanger and mosquitoes would not have suggested itself to anybody but a *prima donna*.

Soon the familiar bustle was in full swing. Gondolas arrived,

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filled to the brim with roses, behind which could be seen elderly Italian admirers, usually impoverished noblemen, twirling their moustaches. Composers arrived, also of the greatest antiquity, bowing and creaking in her salon, and producing from their pockets, like conjurers, songs which they had dedicated to her. These, with the most touching thanks, she promised to sing. As soon as they had gone she threw them into the waste-paper basket with the single word 'Muck!'

And then, of course, there must be a concert. Moreover, the concert must be held on the Grand Canal. How romantic — to sing in a gondola by moonlight! What a wonderful story it would make! 'I shall wear my new Worth, with the silver cape. You will be inspired, my dear Beverley!' I doubted it; in fact, I thought the whole idea was crazy. Melba, normally, had a very proper horror of singing in the open air; her voice, particularly at that period, was not of the fabric with which she could afford to play tricks. As for singing on the Grand Canal — it was fantastic. She would have to compete with the hooting of the steamships, the cries of the gondoliers, and all the bustle of a great city. She thought that all these things would automatically stop as soon as she began to sing, as though she were a sort of vocal Canute. I knew better. I had not the courage to tell her so, which was a pity, for when the concert was given, after endless fusses and bothers, it was a most regrettable farce.

But a few days *before* the concert the miracle occurred.

I had been charged with the business of finding an accompanist. That proved easier than one might have expected, for George Copeland, a superb American pianist, was staying in Venice at the time, and said that he would be only too honoured to play for her. The task of finding a piano was more difficult; pianos in Venice are few and far between; and perhaps that is just as well, for the mists of the lagoons enter into their souls, and cause them, when played, to emit sounds like the wailing of the damned. It was only after several days of search, tiptoeing through strange palazzos, under ceilings by Tiepolo, and braving a quantity of these highly decorated

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infernal machines, that I eventually found a fairly adequate Steinway. It was in an apartment on the Grand Canal.

And now at long last for the miracle, which happened on the following day when Melba, Copeland and I arrived at the apartment to rehearse. It could not have had a more unpropitious beginning. It was very early in the morning, just after nine o'clock, and the concierge had gone out marketing, so that we had to wait for nearly half an hour in the hall, while Melba fumed and fretted against the impossibility of Italy and everything Italian. When he at last returned, he evidently regarded us with the gravest suspicion, as though we had come to steal the *bibelots*, and only consented to leave the room after a substantial bribe. To make matters worse, Melba had a rash on the back of her hand, which was due to an over-indulgence in *scampi à la Milanaise*, and she kept on scratching it and muttering under her breath.

Copeland went to the piano. 'What shall we begin with?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'The Duparc "*Clair de lune*"?'

She shrugged her shoulders, nodded, and walked to the window.

'This is going to be hell,' I thought, settling myself in an obscure corner.

He began the lovely lilting accompaniment. She took a deep breath, lifted her chin, opened her lips.

And then — I must fall back on the phrase — the world stood still.

For the voice that floated into the room was the voice that dimly, as through a veil, I had heard in the old gramophone records; here it was, in all its untarnished glory, the voice of the young Melba. So sudden was the shock, so totally unexpected the impact of this rapturous sound, that for a moment Copeland's fingers stumbled, for he could hardly believe his ears. Then he too was swept into the magic — and for a while the three of us were away on wings, out of the world.

I dared not look at her. I stared out of the window on to the waters of the Canal, thanking God for this moment. The whole

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world seemed to be bathed in silver — silver on the water, silver on the sails, most of all in the air we breathed, for it was as though the room were shining with music. In a sort of dream I realized that people were beginning to stop outside, with fingers to their lips; gondolas were edging silently towards the window, and in them the gondoliers stood with wide eyes and open mouths, as though they were in some angelic presence.

The music ended; the little group outside remained silent, spellbound; there was only the lapping of the water on the steps of the canal. Then, with exquisite tact, Copeland played, very softly, the introduction to the lovely aubade from the *Roi d'Ys*. And again, the voice came, flawless, with the dew on it. And now I slowly turned to watch her. She had on her face an expression of the most extraordinary surprise; she seemed to be not so much singing as *listening*; her eyes strayed round the room, she even turned behind her, as though seeking the source of this enchantment. But always the music flowed on. At the end, quite carelessly, with that incredible assurance which once caused Jean de Reszke to coin the phrase *l'attaque impertinente*, she sang the trill on G, drifted to the top C, held it diminuendo . . . fading, fading . . . till it vanished like a star that is quenched.

And now Copeland grew bolder. Something, quite evidently, was happening, something that might never happen again. It was something that could not — *must* not — be put into words; to speak would have been to break the spell. We were held together only by a thin thread of music, and only while the music lasted were we safe.

He played the opening phrase of 'Depuis le Jour' — an aria which some critics, today, pretend to find shallow and pretentious, perhaps because they have never heard it sung as Melba sang it then. Between her and Copeland, at that moment, there must have been some sort of psychic understanding, for the opening phrase of the aria, as the reader will recollect, consists only of a single spread chord and its fifth; it is little more than a key note, and unless the singer were waiting for it there is no reason why she should know what she was expected to

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sing. Yet without a moment's hesitation the voice echoed the phrase and soared into the lovely song, that is like a winding staircase of melody, losing itself in heights that are unattainable to ordinary mortals. . . .

Depuis le jour ou je me suis donnée  
Toute fleurie me semble ma destinée

I was near to tears.

'It can't go on — it's impossible,' I muttered to myself. 'Something will snap. It's uncanny. It may be the end . . . it may be the swan song.' Almost I wanted her to stop.

But it went on.

By now, the listening crowd stretched far out into the canal, held there, spellbound, in the bright sunlight — utterly silent. At least, that is how my memory recalls it. Obviously there must have been *some* sound apart from the lapping of the water — the occasional hoot of a *vaporetto*, or the cry of a gondolier sweeping out a *piccolo canale*. But the effect was of silence, of fingers to the lips. Even the bolder spirits, who tied up to the steps, steered their way in silence, and then stayed still, staring up to the sky.

The song died away in an incomparable diminuendo.

Et je tremble délicieusement  
Au souvenir d'amour.

Then for the first time Copeland spoke.

'You are singing . . . exceptionally,' he whispered.

She nodded. She still wore that strange expression of bewilderment, as though she were asking herself 'Who is it who has been singing? Whence is the music coming?'

He spoke again. 'Do you feel . . . like this?'

To my astonishment, and to my dismay, he sketched the opening phrase of the recitatif from the Mad Scene in *Lucia*. 'But no,' I wanted to cry, 'that is madness. She has not sung it for ten, for twenty years. It is the supreme test — it is exhausting even for the youngest, most brilliant coloratura. You are setting her an impossible task, you will shatter this wonderful moment for ever.'



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He paused. The echo of the chords trembled in the air. Then, she nodded. And she sang.

It was the culmination of the miracle. Many times have I heard the Mad Scene — by Tetrizzini, by Galli-Curci, by Toti del Monte. Engraved on my memory are all the spiral staircases of its roulades, the fountains of its cadenzas. I know all its pitfalls — the devilish little breath-traps in which it abounds. Never, never have I heard it sung as Melba sang it then, at the age of sixty-one, in the middle of the morning, unrehearsed, with a rash on her hands.

And then, without any warning, in the middle of a scale, she stopped. The silence was so sudden that it hurt. I turned to see what had happened. She was standing there, with her hand to her throat, staring before her, as though she were looking into some great distance.

Slowly she shook her head. I saw her lips move; she whispered, 'No more.' She seemed to be speaking not for that moment only, but for all time. 'No more,' she said again. 'This,' I felt, 'is the last farewell.'

Copeland was crying, quite unashamedly. The moment was so overwhelming in its emotion that I felt that something must be done, and done quickly, to save it from bathos. And then I remembered the crowd outside. I went up to her, took her by the hand, and led her to the window. As soon as they saw her there was a burst of cheering from a thousand warm Italian throats, and all the tightly packed gondolas blossomed with fluttering handkerchiefs and waving hands. 'Viva! Viva!' they cried. 'Bis! Bis!'

But there could be no 'bis'. It had been for the last time.

### § I V

Perhaps these memories should end on this note of high romance; but it would be a false one. She was not a romantic woman, there was hardly a grain of poetry in her temperament, which was shrewd and down-to-earth, and even the word 'Farewell', for her, was little more than a business asset.

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She played astonishing tricks with this word. To the man in the street the word 'farewell' means what it says; to a prima donna it means anything she cares to make it. If Melba gave one Farewell she must have given fifty. Once I reproved her for this practice, with grievous results. She used to get me to write appropriate little messages to the press on these occasions, and one day, shortly before the latest of the many Farewells, she rang me up in a state of great excitement and demanded to see me at once. I was very busy, and was irritated to discover, on my arrival, that all she wanted was yet another of the familiar *adieux*.

I suggested, rather tersely, that perhaps we might use one of the messages we had used before.

Her eyes opened wide in what appeared to be genuine astonishment.

'But I have *never* said Farewell before!'

This was really a little too much. I mentioned the last occasion.

'You must be mad! *That* was "prior to the Australian tour"'. It said so distinctly on the placards. And the one before that was "prior to the American tour".'

'And this one?'

'This one is Farewell to the Albert Hall. That means it's Farewell for ever.' Her voice choked with emotion. 'I shall never sing in London again.'

She did, of course, constantly.

One of the most poignant gramophone records ever made was on the occasion of Melba's Farewell to Covent Garden. That really *was* a Farewell, for she never sang in opera again. It was an unforgettable occasion; the packed audience, led by the King and Queen, glittered as it had seldom glittered before and had certainly never glittered since. But the most glittering thing of all was the voice. It happened, thank God, to be one of her 'good' nights, and they were getting few and far between. For days before I had sweated blood in case there should be any of the tell-tale signs that I knew so well — the forcing of the notes E and F where the middle register merges into the top,

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the woodiness of the high notes when they were sung forte, most of all, the agonizing crack in the addio. But as soon as she opened her mouth I sighed with relief, sat back and relaxed. It was going to be all right. How much more than 'all right' it was is proved by the gramophone disc, which is a recording of parts of the actual performance. Even in this the voice has an unearthly sheen, it is like a spirit drifting slowly away into a moonlit distance.

On the other side of the disc is Melba's Farewell Speech. I feel a special interest in this as I wrote it for her. We had a fierce row about it. She had written a speech herself which she read to me, with great pride. It was quite dreadful. It was so filled with royal highnesses, excellencies and what not that it sounded like a court circular.

I said to her: 'You want to cut out all those people. There's only one man you need mention — Austin.'

'What about Austin?' she snapped.

'You pointed him out to me the other day. You told me that he'd shown you into your carriage at the stage door for forty years. He's your man.'

'I've never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life.'

Nevertheless, she did as she was told. And Austin brought down the house.

### § v

It was inevitable, when Melba died, that I should write a novel about a prima donna. Not to have done so would have been a dereliction of my duty as an artist. A great hullabaloo is always raised when a novelist or a playwright introduces into his work some character who is obviously drawn from life. That is a lot of hypocritical nonsense. There are no manners in art — there is only style. The men or women whom he has chosen should feel honoured, even if he has transfixed them like butterflies to a board.

It is possible to be a gentleman on Mondays and a cad on Tuesdays; the finest artists are cads all the time. Boswell had his days off — there are passages in those salty pages when I

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feel his pen wavers, pauses and halts, brought to a full-stop by the sudden tug of gentility at his elbow. Thank God they are few and far between.

So, after a decent interval had elapsed, I went down to Roquebrune and wrote *Evensong*. I stayed alone at a little hotel called the Maison Imbert, in a tiny room perched on the edge of the cliff, writing three thousand words a day, in conditions of complete perfection — sunshine, solitude, the scent of roses, a glass of red wine by my side. *Evensong* was easier to write than any other book I ever attempted, for though the story I invented was completely imaginary, I knew the central figure so intimately that she took sole charge of the action. Nor, must I add, did I create a caricature. If some of Melba's friends who, afterwards, were bitterest in their comments on my picture of her, could glance, even for a few moments, at the letters which she wrote to me about *them* — letters hastily scribbled in pencil and filled with the most hysterical abuse — they might not be so loud in their own accusations.

When *Evensong* was published it had a considerable success, as a book, as a film and as a play. And I should be the last to deny that part of its success — though I hope only a minor part — was a *succès de scandale*.

I was on the stage of the Arts Theatre, rehearsing Maurice Evans in the first act of my play 'Avalanche', when I first learned of the furore which *Evensong* had created in Australia.

A young reporter from some press agency suddenly bounded out of the wings waving a sheaf of telegrams in my face. 'Say, Mr. Nichols,' he said, 'Australia's gone up in smoke about your book.'

That seemed very gratifying. But as I read the telegrams, I was not so sure. They passed the bounds of reason; they were like the reports of a witch-hunt. Even the respectable *Argus*, which is a rather stodgy Australian equivalent of *The Times*, had delivered itself of a leading article which portrayed me as a blend of Nero and Crippen.

If only the Australians could have heard how Melba herself used to rail against her own country! If only I had possessed a



DAME NELLIE MELBA



EDITH EVANS AS THE PRIMA  
DONNA IN 'EVENSONG'



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gramophone record of the mocking, bitter invective which she poured out upon Australia and everything Australian! By comparison, Mrs. Trollope's assaults on Victorian America were the sweetest milk of human charity.

I found myself in the curious position of having to defend her own countrymen against her onslaughts.

'They may be crude,' I would say, 'but they're incredibly warm-hearted and hospitable, and they're obviously anxious to learn.'

She brushed such protests aside.

'They're hopeless . . . hopeless!' According to her, there was not a single house in Australia which showed the least evidence of taste. There was only one restaurant in the whole continent where one could eat a civilized meal — and that was an obscure little Italian joint in a Melbourne side-street. No — there was *one* other — a tea-shop in Sydney, where one had excellent lobsters. Melba used to eat far too much lobster, and after each feast she would sit back, smacking her lips and saying: 'Delicious — like *nuts*.' But an hour or two later, when she was paying the price of her indiscretion, her face would cloud, and she would say: 'I'm quite certain there was something wrong with those lobsters.' There was, of course, nothing wrong with them, except that she had eaten the better part of mine as well as her own.

'Why did I ever come back? It is a desert — there is nothing, *nobody*!' How often have I heard such cries of despair — rising in an incomparable treble that was made all the more appealing by the faint hint of an Australian accent.

And yet, she must have loved something about it, for it was there that she returned to die, in the shadow of the Blue Mountains, near the hall in which, as a schoolgirl, she had given her first concert. There was a fair amount of applause at that concert, but she told me that the only criticism she received came from one of her school mates. It was hardly a compliment. 'Nellie!' said the child severely, 'I could see your drawers!'

She was a strange creature — stormy, arrogant but somehow endearing. What sort of woman she would have been, without her voice, no man can guess. It does not matter very much.

## LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE

**I**N 1927 I took out an 'author's libel policy' with Lloyds. This is a precaution strongly to be recommended to authors whose work involves the criticism of living persons. One pays £10 a year, or whatever it is, and if there is any trouble, Lloyds look after the legal expenses and the damages to the extent of so many thousand pounds.

Naturally this does not mean that an author can go around slinging mud all over the place to his heart's content. But it does mean that he is protected against the constant dangers which beset even the more amiably intentioned of writers.

It was a typically trivial episode which persuaded me to take out such a policy. I was writing an article about 'Bores', and into it I introduced a stock type of city magnate. What should he be called? Something ridiculous was indicated, something crazy, like A. A. Milne's Mr. Wurzle-Flummery. Suddenly I thought of a name; it was as pompous and grotesque as a character from a comedy of the Restoration — something like Sir Trippety Trip; never did it occur to me that anybody could be walking the streets of London with so ludicrous a title. Yet such was the case; and only the services of a skilled solicitor saved me from being involved in heavy damages.

There was another reason for worrying about libel actions — a novel which I published in February 1927 called *Crazy Pavements*. It was, quite frankly, a satire on the little set that danced attendance on Lord Lathom, with whom I had had a rather dingy quarrel. Before the novel appeared, there was a great hullabaloo, and dreadful things were threatened by his lawyers. But when it was published and became a best-seller, Ned Lathom expressed himself delighted, and once again we were friends. It was one of the many occasions on which I have learned that nothing succeeds like success.

But the main potential source of trouble was in a series of



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portraits in prose which I now began to contribute to the *Sketch* under the title of 'Woad'.<sup>1</sup> The name is symbolical of their frankness. But though those sketches were deliberately irreverent, lightly drawn, with only a few leading lines, I am bold enough to believe that in some of them I came nearer to discovering the essential truth of my sitters than the more sober and 'authoritative' critics.

There is nothing, for example, that I would change in my sketch about Duff Cooper, and years later, in the Embassy at Paris when he was Ambassador, he told me that it still said much that was needed, not only about himself but of the Tory party of which he is one of the most glittering ornaments. This sketch was the result of a luncheon we had at the St. James's Club, and it has some topical importance, for in it he expounded the principles of Toryism with a vigour and a poetic imagination which is tragically lacking today.

Here is a passage which in this year of 1948 might well be pondered by all those young Tories who spend their lives running round in futile circles while a grey, totalitarian mist settles over merry England:

I think that Bagehot summed it up best when he said, 'Toryism means enjoyment'. If you agree to that, then the great political parties of England fall back, quite naturally, into two main divisions. You get the spirit of the Ironsides — a very valuable spirit in some ways, but one which was never gay, even in the height of triumph. On the other side you get the spirit of the Cavaliers, gay even in defeat. I think, of all the silly *clichés* which have ever been coined for a political party, that of the 'stern, unbending Tories' is the silliest. The Tory is not stern. Nor is he 'unbending', which sounds as if he were too bld to bend. He's absurdly

<sup>1</sup> Woad, as every schoolboy knows but as some adults may have forgotten, was the blue paint with which the Ancient Britons are reputed — probably falsely — to have smeared their naked bodies. The title was the suggestion of the editor, Bruce Ingram, who to this day combines an encyclopaedic knowledge of publishing with a sort of brilliant impudence which gives his magazines their special *cachet*. About sixty of the 'Woad' sketches are included in *Are They the Same at Home?* (Jonathan Cape).

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young, simply because he can't help himself. He's got it in his blood. That's why the Tory party goes on. It doesn't owe its success to any particular measure. It doesn't even make any pretence to be logical — thank God. It's simply a spirit.

In a letter which he afterwards wrote to me he developed this theory to its extreme limits, finding Toryism, or its reverse, in the great figures of art and literature.

Botticelli was not a Tory, Lippo Lippi was. So was Raphael. But I'm afraid we can't claim Michelangelo nor Leonardo. Rubens was a Die-hard. Nearly all the Dutch painters were Tories except Ruysdael, and perhaps Rembrandt in his latter period, though I'm not really sure about him. Vermeer was the most perfect Tory of the lot.

Reynolds [the letter goes on] of course was Tory, but I'm not sure that Gainsborough wasn't a Whig. (This, of course, has nothing to do with their political opinions.) Raeburn was a good Tory. Sargent wasn't. I can't think of any other painters for the moment, but I think I've given the other side a fair show. Of course, Watts wasn't a Tory — no allegorical painter could be. *Tories hate allegories.*

How refreshing that letter is, against the present political background! It has courage, integrity, taste and gaiety. It makes one wish that the schools for young Tory politicians could send their candidates to the National Gallery to look at a few pictures and to learn the true standards of civilization. No man who had stood for even a few minutes in front of a Piero della Francesca could go out and talk quite such rubbish about modern society.

## § 11

'Woad' was a success. Gone were the days when I had to sit at the end of the telephone and argue with butlers and secretaries in the forlorn hope of obtaining an interview; people began to ring me up to suggest the interview of their own accord.

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Sometimes they were merely bores, in search of free publicity, sometimes they were not. Among the latter was Diaghileff.

I have a rather sinister memory of Diaghileff, whom I first met with Catherine d'Erlanger, when Serge Lifar, Boris Kochno and Vladimir Dukelski were among his geniuses of the moment. I had been sitting in the stalls watching a rehearsal of the ballet, when he lumbered up to me and asked me to go for a walk. This was a surprising request for several reasons, firstly because he detested walking, secondly because he seldom ventured far from his little group of artists, and thirdly because — as we discovered on stepping out of the stage-door of His Majesty's — it was a very bitter afternoon, with a thin rain slashed with sleet. None the less, he persisted in his intention. He pulled up the collar of his fur coat, shivered, drew his arm through mine and said: 'Tu es *sympathique*.' It was typical of him to '*tutoyer*' before asking one's permission. 'Nous allons faire un petit tour à Less-ess-ter Square. Si nous ne sommes pas morts avant d'arriver, alors . . .' with one of his rare lapses into English ' . . . we will regard the peoples.'

As Less-ess-ter Square was only two or three hundred yards from the Haymarket, it seemed possible, indeed probable, that we might reach it without a premature decease. However, it took longer than one might have expected; Diaghileff was an insatiable *voyeur de vitrines*; at every lighted window he would pause, and stare into it, and murmur the strangest things about the contents. In front of a sports shop, for instance, he clasped his hands and said: 'Football, c'est tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau, mais il manque de couleur.' Unclasping his hands and lifting a forefinger, he hissed: '*Il faut des ballons gigantesques de tous couleurs*.'

When we reached Less-ess-ter Square, instead of sitting down, we stood up by the railings to watch the 'peoples'. I hoped that we would not stay too long, for he had chosen a disreputable corner, much frequented by ladies of the town and shifty young men with dyed hair, and already we were attracting their notice. However, he seemed charmed with their attention.

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I murmured that perhaps he had been recognized.

'Me? Jamais de la vie. It is my fur coat. They imagine to themselves that I am enormously rich.' And he roared with laughter at this fantastic supposition.

It is then that occurred the episode which I have described as 'sinister'. For suddenly the laughter stopped dead, and he tightened his grip on my arm. 'Regardez-moi ça . . .' he whispered, . . . 'regardez-moi ça!' He was staring at the figure of a young man who was standing only a few yards away from us, in the shadow of a plane tree. He was shabbily dressed, with a scarf round his neck and a cap pulled back over his forehead. He wore no overcoat; through his thin suit one could guess the outlines of a superb figure — the figure of a boxer, or . . . of a dancer?

I turned to Diaghileff, preparing some phrase to fit the situation. It seemed to me, quite frankly, an occasion for good 'copy' . . . standing there in the public square with the great impresario, the shadows falling, the wet leaves whirling around us in a bitter wind — and out of the shadows stepping the star of the future, the down-and-out, the young god with music rippling in his limbs. Magazine stuff, but good of its sort.

But out of the shadows stepped no star of the future but — to Diaghileff's obsessed mind — a star of the past. He saw before him his beloved Nijinski. It was rather horrible. Open-mouthed he stared, as at a ghost. 'Tu ne vois pas?' he whispered. 'Tu ne vois pas comme il ressemble à lui?'

The young man, intrigued by these attentions, shifted nearer towards us.

The 'magazine stuff' had turned to life. The young man came nearer still, stood before us under the lamplight. Yes — it was an uncanny resemblance — the same strange narrow eyes, the same sensuous mouth, the same lithe grace of the youth who, twenty years before, had leapt for a brief moment into immortality, and had then crept away, like a wounded animal, into the half-world of the insane.

'Excuse me, but can you let me have a match?'

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The conventional phrase, accompanied by the conventional smirk, was lisped in a high cockney voice; the dream was shattered. 'Non!' cried Diaghileff . . . 'mais non! Va t'en! Va! Va!' He shouted so loud that a policeman who had been standing at the corner began to walk towards us. And the young man, who probably had every reason to avoid the police, turned on his heel and walked rapidly away.

In silence Diaghileff took my arm, and in silence we returned to the hotel. I felt that it was an old, tired man who was walking by my side. All the kick, the sleekness, seemed to have gone out of him. Even the fur coat looked as though it were secondhand.

That night Mrs. Ronnie Greville, with whom he was dining — in the vain hope of getting money for the ballet — rang me up.

'My dear Twenty-Five,' she said, 'whatever have you been doing to Serge Diaghileff?'

'Why, Mrs. Ronnie?'

'He looked as if he had seen a ghost.'

Perhaps he had.

### § III

One had to have one's wits about one, in this sort of job. Above all, one had to have technique.

A good 'interview' — using that rather pedestrian word in the sense of a portrait in prose — is like a good sonnet; it must have unity; it should be a development of one central idea rather than a statement of several unrelated themes. As I became more practised in the art, I found that this unity could often be obtained by posing the subject against a striking and unusual background. (Background is as important in a portrait in prose as in a portrait in paint.)

Thus, when I was writing about Sean O'Casey I lured him to a popular café, and induced him to talk of the eternal verities through a rattle of teacups, a tinkling of spoons and a hiss of steam. The eternal verities, through such a din, sounded rather Irish. O'Casey seemed to me a narrow-minded man, in spite of

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his genius. In those days he seemed to see life through the spectacles of the *Daily Worker*; and though he has enriched the stage with many lusty characters he has also littered it with plenty of cheap cardboard. That is why I portrayed him in a tea-shop; it seemed to put him in his place. At the Ritz he might have posed, in a slum he might have fulminated, in the countryside he might have 'gone poetic'. Lyons' Corner House put a stop to all that.

Every new sitter demanded a new approach; there was never any time to be bored.

One day, for instance, I rang up Lloyd George, and went to breakfast with him in Chelsea, and sat back at a sunny table, with the almond tree foaming pink outside the window, swopping stories as though we were in the lobby of the House of Commons. Of the several occasions when I met him, this was the most memorable; maybe he realized he was posing for his portrait. He had woken early and had been reading Macaulay since the small hours. I can still hear his voice vibrating with scorn as he quoted the essay on Barrère, which he described as the supreme example of obloquy in English prose. Do you remember it?

Renegade, traitor, slave, coward, liar, slanderer, murderer, hackwriter, police-spy—the one small service he could render to England was to hate her; and such as he was, may all who hate her be!

Next week, the sitter was George Gershwin. The hour was twilight, and outside the window were no sunny flowers but the darkening caverns of Pall Mall. The whole of my memory of that evening has a slight tinge of insanity, and especially a tiny incident which, at the time, struck me as odd, though not especially macabre. George had been playing superbly for nearly two hours; he seemed inspired; he said: 'Let's stay in all night and play till we drop.' It seemed an excellent idea. He went off to have a bath. I helped myself to a drink, sat down at the piano, and very softly began a variation of 'Danny Boy' which I had amused myself by turning into a fugue. Suddenly

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the door burst open and George appeared, wet and dripping, with a towel round his waist. 'For God's sake!' he cried. 'Not that!' He stared at me for a moment as though he had seen a ghost and then slammed the door.

For a moment I felt offended; after all, I didn't play as badly as all that — and I'd only been filling in the time till he began again. Then I shrugged my shoulders, and put it down to the eccentricity of genius. And when George came back, he was all smiles and went on playing and playing till I staggered home exhausted.

But years later the same thing happened again, in a much more dramatic way. I was staying at a house on Long Island where Gershwin was a fellow guest. There was a piano in the hall, and before dinner I went up to it and played a few chords with the soft pedal down. I should like to make it quite clear that I do *not* go through life giving unsolicited variations of 'Danny Boy' — (though Elgar once called it the most beautiful melody ever written) — but once again, some imp of the perverse, or some instinct from the subconscious, seemed to guide my fingers into the familiar tune, and once again George stopped it. He appeared at the top of the staircase in a state bordering on hysteria and shouted: 'Not that, damn you, not that!' There was very nearly a blazing row. Later that night he apologized. 'There's something in that tune that hurts my head and makes me kind of want to scream.'

When he died, of brain trouble, I wondered if there had been some strange vibration in this particular melody which affected him, or if it had some unhappy sentimental association.

### § I V

Most of the characters of whom I chose to write came easily to life, dropped quickly into a natural pose, and held it for the required length of fifteen hundred words. Somerset Maugham was one of the exceptions; it is significant that my essay on him begins with the words: 'My manuscript is covered with blots

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and erasures — this about Maugham, that about Maugham — crossed out, written in again, crossed out once more.'

Why was he so difficult to write about? Partly, no doubt, because on some occasions he had given me his confidence in matters which deeply concerned his personal life, and one does not make 'copy' from such confidences, if they come from people whom one really likes. (I cannot help recalling, however, that in the days when I was seeing a great deal of Melba, Maugham himself urged me to keep a notebook. 'You have a tremendous character in that woman,' he said. 'A superb monster. It is your duty to catch it on paper. One forgets so easily.')

Why is he still so difficult to write about? All personal reasons apart, I think it is because in him the artist and the man have often no apparent connection. Having a considerable affection for both, I have little inclination to set them at loggerheads, but there is surely a marked contrast between the austerity of the artist, the writer whose ambition, as he once expressed it to me, is 'to get down to the bare bones of style', and the luxury of the man, the tenant of the Villa Mauresque, the *grand seigneur*, the shrewd investor and the distinguished host. A number of great writers, such as Thackeray, have attached importance to what is vulgarly known as 'social position', and an even greater number, such as Balzac, have fancied themselves as financiers, but few can have combined, as Maugham has combined — with apparently little effort — such triumphs in both the social and financial spheres. A visit to the Villa Mauresque, for a young writer, must be a trifle overwhelming, in spite of the invariable courtesy of the host. The spacious rooms, with their Zoffany's and their Marie Laurencins, the evidence at every turn of a luxurious but impeccable taste, the exquisite garden disposed as gracefully as a page of his own prose, the cool drinks that are wafted on to the flowery terraces as though by magic at the perfect moment — can it all be true? Few men, nowadays, have either the means or the talent to create so harmonious a mode of living. Indeed, but for one thing, it might be all too much. That one thing is the personality of Maugham himself.



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He is completely unpompous. He has dignity, but there is always — as it were — an agreeable imp lurking behind, whom he allows to tweak his ceremonial robes. Maybe it is the imp of his own past, which has been tough, highly coloured and unorthodox.

Maugham would be the first to admit that his work has neither been underpaid nor — at least in his latter years — underestimated. For a few sentences he receives a sum that would have kept Dr. Johnson in affluence for a year, and he has often made more from a single short story than some geniuses from the work of a lifetime. He himself told a friend of mine that he is almost certainly the highest paid author the world has ever known. Pondering this he must occasionally permit himself an ironic smile.

No less impressive than his credit at the bank is his credit with the critics. There was a time, some twenty years ago, when the fact that he wrote for popular magazines was, to the critics, a source of confusion. Critics are simple people; they like things to be docketed and in their proper place. The proper place for first-class prose is in the literary weeklies and the limited editions; it worries them when they encounter it in the ten-cent magazines. All their standards are upset; it is like meeting Virginia Woolf in a fish queue. A writer who wishes to be 'taken seriously' will be well advised, as long as he can afford it, to avoid publishing his work in any magazine with a national circulation. It is almost fatal to prestige. If Max Beerbohm had ever been bribed to contribute to *Home Notes*, the Beerbohm bubble would have burst overnight.

All that is over now, with Maugham. The French critics, who were able to detect the merit of his stories even though they were flanked by advertisements for Coca Cola and Fleischmann's Yeast, hailed him as the successor to de Maupassant. To them he became 'cher maître'. There is — significantly — no equivalent to 'cher maître' either in the English language or the English scene; it is difficult to guess who would be the more embarrassed by the use of the phrase 'dear master', the disciple or the object of his regard. But if anybody could accept the

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title, as by right, it is Willie Maugham. He has a very proper respect not only for himself but for the position of the artist.

I will end this gossip with a little story against myself. Once, having been invited to stay at the Villa Mauresque for ten days, I was greeted almost on my arrival by a telegram recalling me with all speed to London. Never was a telegram more unwelcome — not only because a charming holiday was to be nipped in the bud, but because, on my last meeting with Willie, some weeks before, I had confessed to a habit of sending myself telegrams whenever I went to stay at a house where it seemed likely that I should desire to escape.

It was a dreadful situation. I decided to say nothing about it that night. On the following morning I went up to the swimming pool and lay down in a state of great misery, which was made all the more acute by the warm caress of the sun and the flawless blue of the sky. Maugham appeared for his morning dip, wearing a fantastic straw hat the size of a parasol, and a dressing-gown that would have startled even Joseph. 'My dear Beverley,' he said, 'you look extremely bored.'

Then I told him about the telegram. And though it should surely have been inconceivable that any young man in his senses should desire to escape from an earthly paradise, or to leave the side of one for whom he had so much affection and regard, the memory of my previous confession made me blush and stammer and assume all the attitudes of deceit. Maybe my memory is repainting the episode too darkly; but it certainly is not playing me false in my recollection of his reply. It was very brief. Fixing me with an eye of exceptional beadiness: 'At l-least,' he said, with that faint stutter which has now deserted him, 'at least I trust you are staying to l-luncheon.' With which he plunged briskly into the pool.

## A TOUCH OF THE SUN

IN the last chapter we seem to have arrived, more by chance than by intention, at the Côte d'Azur. Let us stay there for a while, like sensible people, lying in the sun.

My introduction to the Riviera was typical of the times.

I had been invited to stay on a yacht in Cannes, which was not there because its owner was drunk in Monte Carlo. On proceeding to Monte Carlo I was swept on to another yacht, which was intended to return to Cannes, but never left the harbour, owing to the fact that the captain proved to be no captain at all, but a very advanced gigolo, who refused to go near the bridge and wandered about the deck in a leopard skin, doing splits. Behind him, taking photographs, followed his employer, delighted by this turn of events, since he hated the sea and — evidently — adored photography.

Feeling by now somewhat fatigued — for it was already early evening and I had had nothing to eat but olives, which had to be fished out of the bottom of champagne cocktails — and suspecting that the sea, in these parts, was an unreliable form of transport, I accepted the invitation of two unknown Americans who we will call Jack and Jill, to 'get the hell out of this stinking crowd', and go off and find some peace and quiet. Jack, who looked like an early tin-type of Gary Cooper, was dressed in pale pink pyjamas, and Jill, who looked like (and was) a photographer's model, was dressed in practically nothing at all except a brassière and a great many very hard, sharp diamonds. Both were burned black by the sun. Their method of finding peace and quiet was to enter an enormous open Isotta-Fraschini, containing three poodles, a bottle of gin and a quantity of broken gramophone records, and to shoot up the hill like a rocket, with Jack's foot permanently on the accelerator and Jill's hand permanently on the horn. Then they shot down the hill again, and we were — miraculously —

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at Villefranche. Whereupon Jill turned to Jack and hit him sharply across the nose.

Disengaging myself from a row which bore some resemblance to the second act of 'Private Lives', I wandered off to the jetty and stared out to sea. This is one dream, at least, I thought to myself, that seems likely to come true, if only I can get rid of Jack and Jill. All my life I had looked forward to the day when I should see the sun setting over the harbour at Villefranche. I was in a mood for the clichés of beauty, and here they were in abundance. The sea was of the proper peacock variety, April-green in the shallows, dark as fate in the deeps. The ships were children's ships, with their red and yellow sails, and the breeze that guided them still carried the tang of jasmine from the hills. And behind, down the cypress-darkened cliff, the lights were beginning to twinkle from hundreds of little houses, scattered carelessly, 'like a box of children's bricks' — rose and white and palest saffron — with here and there a slash of magenta from the bougainvillaea, or of pink from the foaming geraniums, as though the children had dabbed the bricks with a paint-brush. Yes, this was the Riviera, the jewelled fringe of France — here were the flowers, here were the mountains, here was the sea. . . .

But here, alas, were also Jack and Jill. And that, as I was very soon to discover, was the Riviera's resident snake-in-the-grass. The people! Ye Gods — the people! Drunken debauched, heartless, of an incredible vulgarity — swooping, screaming, racketing.

I may add that, for a least twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four, I could not have liked them more.

It was time to return to my hosts. The row, it appeared, had subsided, and they were sitting at one of the little painted tables outside that charming inn, the Welcome. Jill, who was by now extremely sozzled, was dabbing a lipstick on her mouth which — thanks to Jack — was bleeding profusely; the combination of the two reds gave her a pleasingly savage air. In between dabs she recited to all and sundry what a wonderful lover — dab dab — Jack was, and how — dab dab — she liked to be treated —

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dab — *rough*. This news was received with sympathy by all and sundry, including the poodles, and particularly by a cadaverous creature in the background, with a white haunted face and eyes that seemed to catch the twinkling lights of the villas and make them spin round. Him, I recognized as Jean Cocteau — perhaps the most significant genius of France in those days. He was staying at the Welcome, writing wonderful mad things, and smoking so feverishly that strangely scented fumes drifted through his windows, giving extra piquancy to the already exotic potpourri of fish-scales, l'Heure Bleue, gasoline, tar and orange-blossom.

At this point I decided that the only thing to do was to become faintly alcoholic myself. I seemed to be staying — and yet not staying — on several yachts, and I had a dim recollection of having promised, in the last few hours, to sleep at a number of villas which, if they existed at all — (and that was open to question) — would doubtless be filled, on my arrival, with a horde of gigolos, drug fiends and bleeding photographers' models. This sort of life, enchanting as it may be, is always easier plastered.

So I drank a great deal of absinthe, and it was delicious. More and more delicious. The mountains skipped like rams, and the sea — yo-ho, the sea! — did something like an old sheep. Or was it a young sheep? The little valleys laughed together and the Jordan — yo-ho, the Jordan! — stood still. Or did it?

Round about midnight, the Isotta swept into the drive of a fabulous villa, up in the hills of Mougins, some forty miles away. It belonged to an American millionaire, who was a total stranger to me, by name Bill Burton. He waved me to my room and then departed with Jack and Jill to the swimming pool.

I staggered into a large gold bed that looked as if it had been built for Leda and an outsize swan. As I floated away on fumes of absinthe, I realized that I was not alone. There were three other occupants of the bed, and they were all poodles.

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### § II

And here I would like to switch forward the clock for twenty years.

For this passage, once again, I need a film technique. The camera would pan on to the youthful figure lying, still dressed and still surrounded by poodles, under the heavy baroque mouldings of the four-poster bed. Slowly it would slant to the window, with their crimson curtains, over the window-ledge, tangled with jasmine and yellow roses, and out on to the garden, where the fountains were still playing through the night eternal cadenzas of icy music. Down, down, terrace by terrace, to the moonlit mirror of the swimming pool, vast, deserted, holding its silver surface for the contemplation of the statues that surrounded it — among whom, ironically enough, was a superb bust of Marcus Aurelius, that most eminent of all the Victorians.

And then — swiftly — the picture would fall into ruins. The silver mirror of the pool would be shattered, the laughing water would gurgle down the drains, leaving a vista of dirty marble, coated with green slime. The plumes of the fountains would tremble in an unwonted wind, pause, droop and fall affrighted, their music stilled for ever. And the wind would rise, the wind of war, and blow the petals from the roses and the clouds from the moon; the soft and cheating lights and shadows would be swept away, and with it the soft and cheating creatures who had loved that garden and who, so often, in its scented alcoves, had used it for the purposes of love. They would be blown far and wide, over the world, in a wind that grew fiercer and fiercer, tearing at their finery and tearing at their follies. At the end of it all, some of them, strangely enough, would look better than ever before, even though they might be dead.

Such were the thoughts that passed through my mind when, only the other day, I paid a return visit to this garden which, twenty years before, had been the scene of so much carnival. I was motoring in the district around Cannes when suddenly the countryside seemed strangely familiar.

## A TOUCH OF THE SUN

‘Surely we are near Mougins?’ I asked my friend. ‘And Bill Burton’s villa — the Ferme St. Antoine?’

He nodded. ‘Like to look in? It’s empty, of course, and pretty dilapidated nowadays. But as you were a friend of Bill — and of Patsy. . . .’

For a moment I hesitated. Then I said: ‘Yes, I should like to go there.’

The reader who is acquainted with American crime sheets will already have recognized, in the names of Bill Burton and Patsy, a familiar ring. For Patsy, whom I remember as a laughing, sunburnt child, dancing in and out of the fountains, was fated to be the victim of one of the most revolting murders which has ever startled New York Society. It was a crime so sordid that if it had originated in the brain of a Kafka he would have rejected it as far-fetched. We need not dwell on it; it is enough to observe that it was a blend of Euripides and the Grand Guignol.

Now, perhaps, you will understand why my pen suddenly switched on the clock. I could not recall that first visit without also recalling the last.

We need not dwell long in the haunted garden. Those who remember it — and they must be many — may be interested to hear that all the beauty that Bill had planned has come to full flower. The groves of cypresses that then were striplings are now cathedral avenues. The Japanese garden, that was sparse and bare, is now a tangle of loveliness. The villa itself is much the same, though the windows are broken, and across the frescoes in the loggia there are placards — *RAUCHEN VERBOTEN* — that bring back the tramp of the invaders’ feet. One day no doubt, the house will come to life again, the gardens will be trimmed and tidied, new faces will smile from the windows.

But I doubt whether I shall ever stay there again. For always I should see that little figure dancing by the fountains, and her shadow would be red.

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### § III

When I woke up on the following morning, and unwrapped myself from the nest of poodles, it did not take me long to decide that the Ferme St. Antoine was not really my cup of tea. It was magnificent, it was incredibly luxurious, and Bill — whom I met for the first time at breakfast, which took place at two-thirty in the afternoon — was the soul of courtesy. Whatever the eccentricities of his private life, his friends were not made unduly aware of them. And yet, it was all just a bit too much.

After all, I reminded myself, I was a worker. The discipline of the desk was in my bones. Get tight once in a way — yes. Go crazy once in a way — yes. Share a bed once in a way — yes, though not quite so numerously nor so exclusively with poodles. But not all the time. Don't make it a daily diet. The desk comes first. And here there was not even a desk. It is true that in my room there was a gigantic medieval table, placed in almost pitch darkness, with a crimson velvet blotter (devoid of paper) and a vast baroque ink-stand (empty of ink) and a scarlet quill pen which would not form letters less than half an inch thick. There was, in short, all the equipment which a very rich man would regard as necessary for a writer, and Bill was hurt when I told him I could not write in his house.

'But the atmosphere,' he protested, 'surely the atmosphere is enough to inspire anybody?' Even as he spoke, cars were rolling up to the front door filled with screaming strangers, and the rattle of cocktail shakers, which went on from morn till midnight, was rising in its twilight crescendo. The poodles were yapping, there was the sound of high jinks from the distant swimming pool, the Burton asylum was functioning at full blast.

Firmly, I excused myself, drove back to Cannes, found a quiet room at the Martinez, had an omelette and a Vichy water for dinner, and went early and lonely to bed.



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### § IV

At that time, there were several self-appointed queens of the Riviera, but the only one whose sway was quite undisputed was Maxine Elliot. I shall never forget my first meeting with this remarkable woman, for whom, as I grew to know her better, I developed a measure of genuine affection.

It was on the terrace of her Arabian Nights' villa, the Château d'Horizon, that stretches its white arms to greet the almost eternal sunshine of the Golfe Juan. She was lying in a chaise-longue, shading her ravaged beauty with a parasol, and she was addressing sharp words of reproof to a young English footman, tall and tanned, who was blinking nervously before her.

'You *must* remember, Robert, to put sugar on the monkey's strawberries. Look! She's not eaten a thing.'

She pointed downwards. Near her feet was a silver plate, piled high with *fraises du bois*. By the edge of the plate a small monkey scowled and fidgeted, occasionally cramming a strawberry into its mouth and spitting it out again.

'I'm sorry, madame.' Robert clicked his heels, went over to a marble table and returned with a sugar bowl. He knelt down and carefully sprinkled sugar over the strawberries. As he did so, the monkey tried to bite him, but he was too quick for her.

'Mix it up well.'

He mixed it, still avoiding the monkey's vicious bites. Then he rose, clicked his heels and took his leave.

I have never forgotten that little scene — the young footman's broad back, the sunlight on his hair as he bent down in service of the monkey, the crimson of the strawberries, which matched the crimson of his mistress's lips. It was all so very obviously the stuff from which revolutions are made.

And yet Maxine Elliot was not an unkindly woman. Somerset Maugham once said to me: 'Maxine is a perfect example of a supremely selfish woman who finds her greatest happiness in giving pleasure to other people.' The comment was apt.

Everything about her was sumptuous. The swelling bosom —

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that was sumptuous. The eyes, the hair, the gestures, all were of a sumptuosity. Her friends were to match; when she lent her villa it was to the Duke of Windsor; and if you ever saw an odd figure sprawling about on the rocks below the terrace, if it was not a king it was Winston Churchill, if it was not Winston Churchill it was a duke. Only occasionally was it an author or an artist, and even then it was an author whose elegance was not only of the pen, such as Michael Arlen.

But the most sumptuous thing of all about Maxine was her château. To many of us it was a focal point of the Riviera, and since it crystallized a mode of life which has probably vanished for ever, we will pause and study it for a few moments.

Some people described the Château d'Horizon as a triumph of mind over matter, others as an example of sheer feminine cussedness, while there were some who shrugged their shoulders and said that it was just a proof of the power of unlimited money. None of these critics quite hit the point. The main credit for this fabulous structure, round which so many legends have been woven, should go to its architects, the American Barry Dierks and the British Eric Sawyer. When Eric and Barry first arrived on the Riviera, there was a tendency to regard them as playboys; they very soon proved that behind their charming, casual, sun-tanned exterior, they had more than their share of taste. (Of toughness, too, as was shown by their brilliant war record.) Maxine was shrewd enough to guess their quality, and she commissioned them to build her château. It was their first big job, and it still remains one of the minor miracles of modern architecture.

Half-way between Cannes and Juan les Pins there was a long thin strip of rocky land which had been on the market for years because nobody thought it would be possible to build on it. There was the sea and the rocks, and then, immediately behind, there was the coastal railway, which carried a heavy traffic of rattling expresses and sooty goods-trains. And behind the railway there was the main road, which was the gilded highway for an endless procession of racing cars — cars with arrogant exhausts and truculent sirens, driven by the world's most

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determined playboys who, having nothing whatever to do, were naturally in the greatest possible haste to do it.

Such was the unfriendly strip on which the keen eye of Maxine Elliot lighted, one day when she was driving to the Casino. A faded notice-board proclaimed that there was 'Terrain à Vendre'. To most of the world this proclamation must have seemed somewhat ironic, for who in his senses could possibly desire to perch himself on those rocks, blackened by soot, blinded by spray, and deafened by motor-horns? It would be a folly, but a folly inexcusable. Nevertheless it was a folly that Maxine determined to commit, and in after years, countless of her friends were only too charmed to excuse her.

Nothing is more fun than 'playing at houses', and while the walls of the château were slowly rising, on that narrow strip, I used to clamber over the rocks with Maxine, discussing terraces and swimming pools. It all seemed somewhat too academic, because I did not see how it would be possible to build a wall high enough to shut off the railway, nor a terrace broad enough to sit on without falling into the sea. I kept my doubts to myself; others were not so tactful. Among these was Lady Mendl, who had herself been responsible for the decoration — with exquisite taste — of hundreds of houses in America and Europe, and, probably for this reason, was inclined to be critical of the efforts of her rivals. However, even Elsie Mendl did not openly prophesy disaster; she contented herself with an attitude of pained negation.

This sort of dialogue would take place during the luncheons which Maxine used to serve in the little lodge where she lived while the villa was being built.

MAXINE Well, Elsie dear, I always told you that this was the choicest spot on the whole coast.

LADY MENDL Yes, dear, you always did.

MAXINE Why you never snapped it up yourself I can't imagine.

LADY MENDL Not *quite* quiet enough for me, Maxine dear.

MAXINE (*snorting*) Not quite quiet enough? What are you

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talking about? (*Noticing Lady Mendl glancing over her shoulder to the railway*) Oh — I see — the railway! Well, what's wrong with the railway?

LADY MENDEL Nothing dear. Just a little close.

MAXINE Close? Nonsense! It's ridiculous, all this talk about the railway!

(*At this point, a gleam comes into Lady Mendl's eye, for she has heard in the distance the ominous roar of an approaching express*)

LADY MENDEL What did you say, darling?

MAXINE (*hastily, to beat the express*) Ridiculous, this railway talk.

LADY MENDEL I can't hear, dear. (*The express hurtles by*) All these trains!

MAXINE (*shouting*) Only once a day.

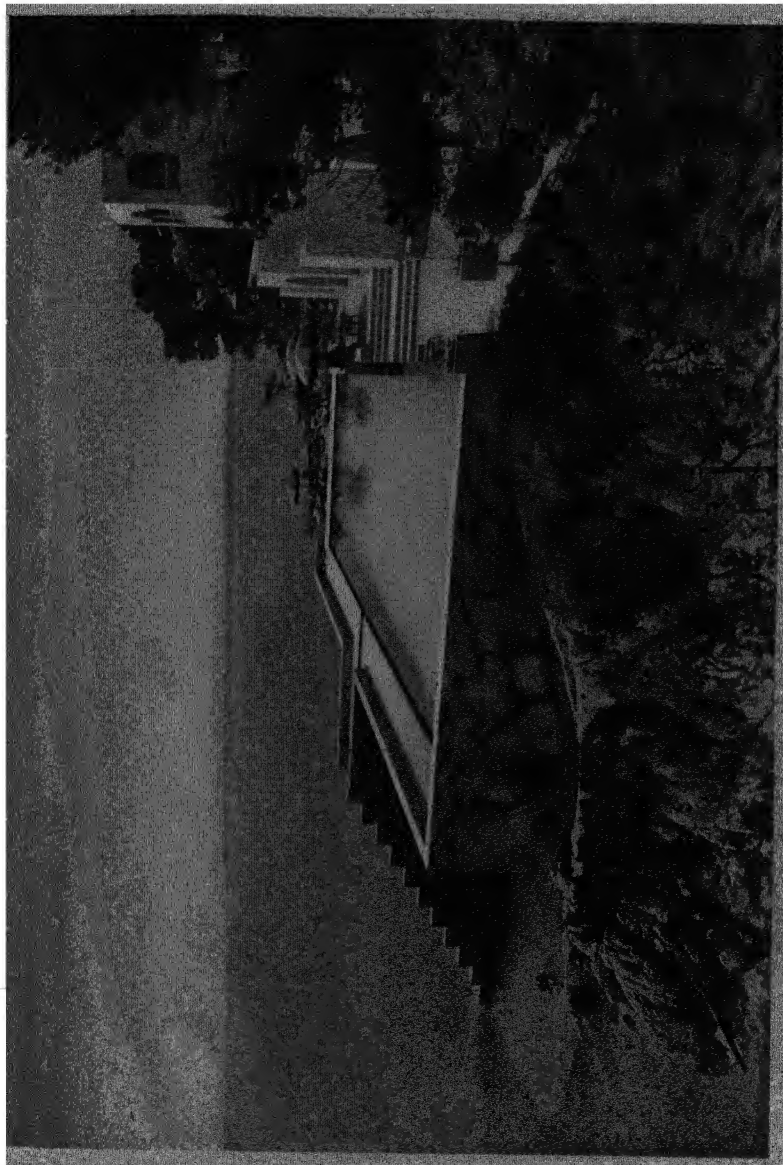
LADY MENDEL Only once a what?

MAXINE (*muttering, sotto voce*) She ought to use a trumpet. (*At the top of her voice*) Only once a day! The Riviera express!

LADY MENDEL Really? (*A large flake of soot floats on to her plate*) Really? (*She pushes aside the soot, very ostentatiously, with the edge of her rusk*) Really!

Nevertheless, Maxine triumphed. She blotted out the railway, she muffled the motor-horns, she created a magic zone of silence in which one heard only the ripple of the waves and the sigh of the wind in the trees. Needless to say, it was not she who really performed this miracle, but the two young architects, Dierks and Sawyer. They built gigantic walls on the very edge of the embankment, they designed immense windows filled with diamonds of sound-proof glass, and they coaxed the last inch out of the narrow rocks. They even managed to contrive a tiny garden.

All this, of course, was gall and wormwood to many of Maxine's dearest friends, who had prophesied disaster. Among these was Lady Castlerosse, who was a constant visitor at the château. One day at lunch she complained bitterly that her newest evening dress had been covered with smuts that had drifted through her bedroom window. Maxine said nothing.



THE SWIMMING POOL AT CHATEAU D'HORIZON



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But I have never seen any woman look so delighted when, a few moments later, the monkey gave Lady Castlerosse a sharp nip on the ankle, and I shall always wonder if Maxine was telling the truth when she swore that there was not a drop of iodine in the house.

Life at the Château d'Horizon was lazy, hedonistic, completely unreal and altogether delightful — in small doses. I could never stay there for long, as work was impossible in such surroundings. The day began with orange juice and coffee on the terrace, by the side of the great pale blue swimming pool. By noon one was dazed with sun, and intoxicated with the scent of the pines, the flowers, the ozone. Lovely females drifted by, almost naked, bronzed youths sported, footmen appeared with cocktails of astonishing potency. From time to time one could stroll over to the chute which precipitated one sharply into the peacock-blue water of the Mediterranean, and from a sensuous point of view I think that those moments were the happiest of my life. During the long beastliness of the war, when every nerve in one's body screamed for warmth and blue skies, I often felt that if I could have one week at Maxine's I should die content.

### § v

Among the throngs that wandered in and out of the Château d'Horizon, one might occasionally see the figure of a stoutish woman in late middle age, very simply dressed in black, reclining in a chair with one hand on an ebony cane and the other playing with a long string of pearls. She had no pretensions to great beauty; and yet, she stood out from the painted extravagant creatures by whom she was surrounded. And if you watched her, as the day went by, you would notice that somehow or other — and with certainly no effect on her part — she, and not Maxine, was the 'life and soul' of the party. If there was anybody particularly distinguished, he would gravitate towards that chair, find himself captivated, and remain till he was torn away by some power beyond his control. Young men deserted the most beautiful young ladies, and young ladies

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deserted the most beautiful young men, merely to sit with this — outwardly — quite ordinary person. For what? Not certainly for her 'chic' — (atrocious word!) — for though she bought most of her clothes at Lanvin, and though she had an admirable maid to look after them, she cared so little about dress that she was quite capable of wearing them inside out. (Once, when her maid was ill, she *did*, and sat with me in the front row of the Metropolitan proclaiming to all the world that she was a patron of the Galeries Lafayette.) Nor for her money, for though she had a very large income, and was the soul of generosity, she had also a very large collection of relations . . . and these details, on the Riviera, are very soon *répandus* among the spongers. Nor for any of those curious qualities which, for lack of a better phrase, I must call 'party manners' — for she did not play the piano, her bridge was atrocious, her backgammon non-existent and — worst of all — she never told malicious stories about her dearest friends.

So what was it that made the whole of that world — and of any other world in which she moved — gather round the chair of Emily Borie Sherfessée — whom Chicago will perhaps remember as Emily Ryerson?

I can only fall back on the old word — 'life'. Emily bubbled with life. She was a brimming jug of it, red, neat, unadulterated. Certain women can be compared to certain wines — Eleanor Roosevelt is a nice clean cider, Garbo is a rare and exquisite hock (in danger of going sour), the Duchess of Windsor is Pommery 1935, well iced, Marian Anderson is rich old port. But to find the Bacchic equivalent of Emily you would have to go through the whole cellar.

She was also — and again I have to fall back on a tattered old warhorse of a word — a 'lady'. There have been thousands of definitions of a 'lady' — ethical, aesthetic, impudent. What is a lady? It is the sort of question they ask one at Brains Trusts, and one never has the answer ready. For the moment I will suggest that a lady is one who is sure of her position. Whatever doubts Emily may, from time to time, in common with the rest of us, have entertained about the universe, she never enter-



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tained any doubts about *that*. She was sure of her position because she never thought of it.

I really introduced the figure of Emily in order to tell my favourite story about her, which is linked with the visit to Chicago of the late Queen Marie of Roumania.

As one of the leaders of Chicago society, Emily was naturally very much to the fore in all the arrangements which were made for entertaining her Majesty. One day some witty dramatist will use the Queen's tour as the theme for a comedy; it abounded in ludicrous situations; and it would be difficult to say who behaved most strangely, the Queen, or the ladies who pursued her. The only person who really came well out of the business was Emily herself.

It happened like this. On the Queen's last night in Chicago there was a gala performance at the Opera, attended by Queen Marie, sitting in Emily's box. I forget what was performed, or who was singing; after all, these were matters of quite minor importance, for on this occasion the audience was the show. Never, even at the Diamond Horseshoe, had so many jewels blazed on American bosoms, so many orchids trembled on American shoulders.

High up above this glittering mob sat the Queen and Emily — the Queen looking more than ever like Hollywood's conception of Balkan regality, and Emily looking — well — just herself, except that she had dabbed a little powder on her nose, and stuck a tiara on her head. The performance rolled on to its dramatic conclusion, the final curtain fell, and the audience rose to stand in silence to the Roumanian national anthem. This concluded, the Queen turned with a gracious gesture to Emily . . . and . . .

'And,' said Emily, 'I could see that she was fishing in her bag to give me something — probably the Order of the Fifth Roumanian Eagle, with palms, or something like that, and really, I didn't want it at all.'

'You have been so very, very kind to me,' began the Queen, still fishing in her bag, 'and I have been wondering if there is any way in which I can possibly repay you. . . .'

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'Yes, ma'am,' interrupted Emily. 'There is.'

The Queen looked somewhat startled by this abrupt declaration. 'Indeed?'

'There's one thing I really do want,' said Emily.

'What is that?' And the Queen, evidently deciding that this was not quite the moment for the Order of the Fifth Roumanian Eagle, with or without palms, shut her bag with a snap.

'All my life,' said Emily very earnestly, 'I have longed to drive full tilt round Chicago with all the speed cops whistling around, as though I were an ambulance or a gangster, or both. You have been doing it, ma'am, for days. . . .'

The Queen gasped.

'Could we possibly . . . could we possibly do it together — tonight?'

The Queen gasped again. For a moment Emily feared there was going to be an explosion. And then, slowly, the Queen began to smile, and then to laugh, and to go on laughing. 'I think,' she said, 'that this is the most enchanting thing that has happened to me since I came to America.'

'Then we really may do it?'

'We will go at once.'

And together the two ladies made their way through the milling crowds. As they entered the car there was a whispered consultation with the chauffeur. And then they set off, at such a pace and with such a roar of sirens that the peaceful inhabitants of Chicago must have shivered in their beds, convinced that a full-scale war had broken out among the gangsters. How long they continued their breathless progress up and down the city I do not know. Emily told me that it was only for about ten minutes; years later in Bucharest, Queen Marie, recalling the incident, told me that it seemed to *her* to go on for at least a couple of hours. Both ladies, however, agreed on one point — that it was the happiest lark they had ever enjoyed since they were kids at the circus.

Do you begin to see Emily's point, and why her chair was the centre of any gathering, however distinguished? Or have I given the impression that her attraction was merely a

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question of high spirits? It went very much deeper than that.

Hugh Walpole, who adored her, once said to me that if Aeschylus had known Emily he would have written a great tragedy around her. That was perhaps an exaggeration, but there had been a time in her life when fate dealt her a series of blows under which a lesser woman would have sunk exhausted. With her first husband and two young children she was motoring in France when a cable arrived from America bringing word of the sudden death in a motor accident of their eldest son — an undergraduate at Yale and a boy of exceptional promise. They drove through the night, back to Paris, to get cabins on the first boat home; and they got them — on the *Titanic*. As the ship went down, the last thing she saw was the glow of her husband's cigar, waving cheerfully through the darkness. She came home a widow, to the grave of her boy. And there was soon another grave. Her daughter Suzette was one of the rarest creatures God ever made. She too died. Suzette's husband — whom Emily adored, and to whom she clung in those dark days — found life insupportable, and disappeared without trace while on a boat bound for South America.

It was that sort of thing, again and again; a strange and ominous fatality seemed to dog the footsteps of those whom she loved. Only in the later years, in her villa at Cap Ferrat, with the ideal companionship of her second husband, Forsythe Sherfese, did she know any peace.

It was Forsythe — scholarly, retiring Forsythe — who told me the story on which I should like to end this little memoir. They were motoring together in the North-West Frontier province of India, between Rawalpindi and Srinagar, on their way to the Vale of Kashmir — Emily, Forsythe, an Indian chauffeur and Gilberte, her French maid. Towards dusk, in high mountainous country, they reached a narrow, curving section where the road had been hewn out of a precipitous mountain-side; a deep perpendicular abyss on one side and an almost equally perpendicular cliff rising high up on the other, almost into the clouds. Somewhere, very high up above the road, there had been a land-slide, and earth and uprooted bushes and gigantic rocks

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came hurtling down almost without intermission, striking the road and bounding off into the ravine below. This had been going on for several hours, and there, stretching far into the distance, was a traffic block of altogether Asiatic proportions. Camels, bullock carts, lorries, caravans, all frozen into immobility. Emily, who could never bear to be kept waiting, leant out of the window and demanded the cause of the hold-up. Even as she spoke, a loud roar supplied the answer; a large portion of the overhanging cliffs came hurtling down in a cascade of rocks and dust.

Emily got out, sized up the whole situation, re-entered the car, and told the chauffeur to go ahead. He protested, pointing to what was happening, and refused to budge. The road superintendent came up and refused to let them pass. Thereupon Emily, calmly but with a most determined manner, got out of the car. 'Nonsense,' she said. 'If you're all afraid of a little dirt I'll go by myself,' and started out on foot, followed, with a sigh, by a resigned but apprehensive Forsythe. Unhurriedly, with never a glance backwards, as though she were sauntering in her own garden, she calmly walked across the dangerous stretch, the rain of rocks and dirt dividing to permit her passage. The road-workers, the halted travellers, watched her silently, and when she was safely across — it seemed a very long time — the chauffeur, ashamed of his very excusable hesitation, threw the car into gear and sped across as quickly as he could, fortunately without mishap. When he caught up with them, Emily quietly took her seat, put up her parasol, and calmly resumed her interrupted conversation, an intricate discussion on the early letters of Henry James — who, needless to say, had been among her admirers. So they proceeded, past the huddled tribes of Asia, armed with a parasol, and the avalanches stayed their fury. They knew when they had met their match.

Yes, Emily was a great woman. She was more, she was a great soul.

## STUDY IN BLONDE

WE are nearing the Wall Street crash.

I have a feeling — maybe because I was personally involved in it — that the future historian will regard this economic cataclysm as the true dividing line between the old world and the new; after the swirling floods of capital had plunged over the cliffs of 1929, nothing was quite the same. So we had better enjoy those years when we were still drifting happily over the sunny uplands.

I certainly made the most of them. Looking through piles of dusty diaries and reference books in the attic I seem to have been quite tiresomely energetic. Articles and stories and revue sketches poured from me like well-turned sausages from an efficient machine. I hopped backwards and forwards across the Channel as casually as nowadays I would cross the street.

And — of course — I went to lecture in America. A description of this experience would be tedious; besides, I have told most of the best stories connected with it in *The Star-Spangled Manner*.<sup>1</sup> But one story I have not told, and it is so bizarre that it deserves more than a passing reference. It is the story of my tour *de luxe* with the great American financier, Otto Kahn.

Otto Kahn was my ideal American millionaire; he used his millions with taste, kindliness and understanding. Needless to say, he had the inevitable mansion on Fifth Avenue, and the equally inevitable château on Long Island; naturally, he owned diamonds and yachts and railways. There was a cosy feeling, when travelling with him, that one could request the engine driver to stop so that one could admire the view. (Once we actually did this, to the fury of a number of earnest business men who, for reasons best known to themselves, were desirous of arriving punctually in — of all places — Philadelphia.)

But apart from these obvious appurtenances of wealth, he was

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Cape, 1928.

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a patron of the arts in a sense that has been little understood since the days of the Renaissance. He was one of the few supporters of the Metropolitan who was more interested in music than in tiaras; he had a poetic vision about Hollywood — which he pathetically persisted in treating as though it were worthy of his intelligence; and in England he will always be remembered by the men of St. Dunstan's home for blinded soldiers, which he gave to the British nation at the end of the first World War.

He was, in short, a very considerable dear.

### § 11

We met at a party in Park Avenue, when a blizzard was raging outside the window and New York was giving a sizable imitation of hell.

'What are your future plans?' he asked.

'I sail home in ten days.'

'Why not come to Palm Beach with me instead? And afterwards to Hollywood?'

As our friendship was of less than five minutes' duration, the invitation seemed too precipitate to be taken seriously.

But he was quite serious. He repeated it. And then something awful happened.

'There will be eight of us,' he said. 'You play bridge, of course?'

I thought very hard for a moment. It was a delicious invitation, but it was evidently issued on the assumption that I played bridge, of which I was totally ignorant. I gulped, and said, 'Yes'.

On the following morning I was up early, making frenzied appeals over the telephone to my friends, trying to persuade them to turn me into a Culbertson in the space of ten days. They showed a pardonable reluctance to take on the job. 'Quite impossible,' they murmured. 'Madness! You'll be ruined! You haven't that sort of brain.'

So then I looked in the *New York Times*, and saw several

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advertisements by ladies who taught bridge professionally. I chose one at random and made an appointment. She said: 'I shall have to charge you twenty dollars an hour as it's a rush job.' It seemed a monstrous sum, but I consoled myself by the thought that I should win it all back in no time.

A week of torture ensued. She was a gloomy lady, with a strong and somewhat morbid imagination. It was her custom to spread out four hands, face upwards on the table, and then to conjure up mythical opponents, and to speak to them as though they actually sat there in the flesh. These persons she called 'Sir Thomas' and 'Lady Jones' — doubtless as a sop to my British prejudices.

'My!' she would cry, pointing to the empty air. 'Look what Sir Thomas is doing with his ten of diamonds!'

I did not really care what Sir Thomas was doing with his ten of diamonds, nor with his ten of anything else; all I wanted to know was what to do with my own knave. What I did was always wrong; but my shortcomings were quickly forgotten, for now the ghostly 'Lady Jones' was the culprit.

'Goodness!' gurgled my instructress, giving a playful slap to the ether. 'Just watch what her ladyship is doing!' Then she would gaze with glazed eyes at nothing at all, stretching out her hand in the meantime to move the wrong card. 'What a *wicked* lady!' Another slap. 'Tell her what she has done wrong!'

As I could not share my teacher's convictions as to the solidity of this phantom, and as, in any case, I had not the remotest idea what 'she' had done wrong, my answer was usually unorthodox.

It was all somewhat uncanny and exhausting. When I said goodbye at the end of the week we were both worn out, and even Lady Jones and Sir Thomas showed signs of flagging.

One morning a week later, when I was sunbathing at Palm Beach, I picked up a copy of the *New York Times*, and lazily scanned the advertisements to see if my teacher was still giving lessons.

But she was no longer in the advertising section; she had made the front page. The day after I left her she blew her brains out.

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### § III

There were eight of us. I was very much the youngest and very much the poorest. The best bridge player was Jim Bush — a real charmer. (He was the second husband of Mrs. Harrison Williams, who always seemed to me to have been specially created in order that she might sit on imitation rocks at very expensive pageants, looking almost too much like Helen of Troy.)

As we assembled, on the first night, in one of our luxurious Pullman sitting-rooms — (Otto Kahn seemed to have taken the greater part of the train) — Jim said:

‘We shall be playing bridge for a number of weeks. At the end of that period I shall come out top. The rest of you will be in this order.’ He went through the whole list, marking us 1 to 8 . . . with me, of course, way down at the bottom. And that was how it was, in spite of the fact that Jim, throughout the trip, held persistently mediocre cards. Whenever I hear people complaining of their hands at bridge, I remind them (with great sweetness) of this little story.

The ‘aristocrat’ of the party was Prince Ruspoli, a nice, dark, sleepy man, with a charming habit of getting lost at wayside stations. There are so many Ruspoli’s popping up all over the place, that I cannot remember which one he was. Then there was David Gray, who combined an air of exquisite elegance with an engagingly Rabelaisian sense of humour. (In later years he was American Minister to Eire.) My own nearest confidant was Rudolf Kommer, who was Max Reinhardt’s ‘right-hand man’, whatever that may mean. He was brilliantly intelligent and extremely greedy, with a special *penchant* for chocolate almonds. For some reason or other which nobody — least of all himself — could explain, he had a Roumanian passport. He was permanently and hopelessly in love with Lady Diana Cooper.

‘She could tr-r-rample on me,’ he used to inform us, gazing moodily out of the window. ‘She could tr-r-rample on me, and I should die content.’ Lady Diana, I understand, had a feeling



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of warm and gentle affection for Rudolf Kommer. So had her husband — but it did not extend to tr-r-rampling.

There were also two elderly gentlemen whose names, I am ashamed to say, I have forgotten. All I can remember about them is that they were very nice, hideously rich, and in a permanent state of acute indigestion. They used to stand at the end of the train, swaying backwards and forwards opposite the ice-water tank, with a little paper cup in one hand and a pile of charcoal biscuits in the other. From time to time they would pop in a charcoal biscuit — which left a peculiar black patch on their tongues — and then take a gulp of ice-water to swill it down. I wish I could remember who they were.

### § I V

We swept down to Palm Beach — which I shall skip — and to Hollywood — which I shall also skip — and back to New York. We can dispense with all that. For the real fun occurred in between — whenever the train stopped *en route* — in Texas, or New Orleans or New Mexico or way out in the desert. It was then that the luxurious, legato rhythm of our lives suddenly jerked into high comedy.

Why?

Because of a little thing called — *l'amour*.

Otto Kahn was himself a faithful husband and a fastidious connoisseur of female beauty. When he looked at a woman he seemed to put a frame round her and hang her on a wall, as though she were an early Rubens — which she sometimes was, particularly in Texas. One could almost imagine him saying: 'My dear, your neck is a little out of drawing — you should see Tintoretto about it.'

Therefore, the astonishing scenes which now began to occur were not devised for his own delectation; very much to the contrary; they were merely an example of American hospitality on the grandest possible scale. Kahn was determined to be a perfect host, and if we could have been privileged to look into

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his mind, at the beginning of the journey, we should probably have found him saying something like this:

‘Let me see, I think I have thought of everything . . . Jim Bush’s favourite cigars, that special white wine for Ruspoli, Kommer’s chocolate almonds. Flowers in all the state rooms, piles of the newest books. All the menus are arranged at the various hotels where we are stopping. Can there be anything I have forgotten?’

And then, with a cry of dismay, he recalls a very important thing that he has quite forgotten — this thing called *l’amour*. Not that he felt any urge towards it himself — it was of his guests that he was thinking. To any true American, it was inconceivable that a large party of rich and middle-aged gentlemen could go rattling across the continent of America, in the height of luxury, without constant mental propulsions in the direction of *l’amour*. Human nature, to say nothing of steam heat, would forbid such shortcomings.

Most of all, I suspect, he was thinking of myself. On the day before we started he said to me, with a paternal sigh: ‘We must see to it that you meet some charming young ladies.’

I said thank you, that would be very nice, but he must not trouble himself unduly. America was so full of charming young ladies that one would probably meet them anyway.

‘But we must make a special effort for a young Englishman,’ he insisted. ‘Youth will be served.’

Youth was.

I am not quite sure how it happened, but I imagine that he must have explained my assumed requirements to one of his staff, for always, before we arrived at a town, a messenger would have been scouring the neighbourhood for suitable blonde companions. They *had* to be blondes of the purest ray serene, presumably because Otto Kahn had heard that gentlemen preferred that sort of thing. (Nobody ever asked me what I *really* liked — I might have had a passion for coal-black mummies for all they knew or cared.)

Somehow or other the blondes were always forthcoming, though I have a shrewd suspicion that in the smaller towns some of them had been compelled to wear wigs.

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The eight enchantresses were always lined up at the station to greet us when we arrived. Usually Otto Kahn had forgotten all about them; he would be playing bridge, or discussing international finance, or reading the poems of Heine. And on several occasions when he looked out of the window and saw what was waiting for us, I noticed a look of momentary irritation cross his face. However, it was quickly banished, so determined was he to be the perfect host, and so obstinate his conviction that his guests — with a particular accent on myself — were incapable of any protracted abstinence from blondes.

Coming across to me he would wave his hand through the glass in the direction of the awaiting sirens. 'You see?' he would say, patting me on the shoulder. 'Have we not arranged some charming companions for you?'

There was but one answer to that question. And it was the signal for all of us to rise, and brace ourselves for the fray. It was only too evident that some of the more senior members of the party would have preferred to go on dozing, or finishing a rubber of bridge, or ruminating on their bank balances. However, to have confessed to such weakness would have been humiliating to their own virility, besides being discourteous to their host. So as the doors of the carriage were opened, we all assumed expressions of gallantry, and — as far as was possible behind pince-nez — of bright-eyed desire, and emerged to greet our fates.

'This is Rosy . . . this is Dolly . . . this big girl here calls herself Poppy, but there's nothing sleepy about her!'

Some such pleasantry smoothed over the awkward moments of introduction, and then to the accompaniment of a twitter of giggles and chirps, we climbed into a fleet of cars that waited outside, one couple to each car. It was seldom more than a few minutes' drive to the hotel, but even those few minutes were somewhat embarrassing. It was difficult to know quite what was expected, and any attempt at a rapid conquest — even had one felt so inclined — would have been hampered by the fact that my accent appeared to make most of my conversation quite incomprehensible to the lady of my choice — or rather

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of nobody else's choice, for being the youngest, I usually got the duds.

Arrived at the hotel, we handed back our blondes to the courier temporarily intact, and proceeded to our rooms, to bathe and refresh ourselves for the forthcoming orgy. I always delayed my entrance till the latest possible moment, i.e. till cocktails were announced; for it is very fatiguing to make gallant conversation on an empty stomach, particularly if one is not quite sure whether one is making it to the right person. (We were always getting our blondes mixed up, particularly as the weather grew warmer.) When I arrived in the private room it was usually to find most of the party already assembled, with the ladies draped around in postures of methodical allurements, leaning on sofas, pouting before mirrors, or fluttering their lashes overtime in dark corners. Most of them, I fancy, were members of touring theatrical companies, which perhaps accounts for the thoroughness with which they had dressed for their roles; their clothes were as fluffed and spangled as a Christmas tree, and their *coiffures* were blown up like cheese *soufflés*; moreover, they were so fiercely scented that it was wise to gulp one's dry martini the moment it was poured out lest it became too heavily impregnated with chypre.

To a European observer it would have appeared a party of a distinctly libidinous nature. How could the European be expected to understand the strange sexual psychology of the American male which compels him to reverse the counsel of Polonius? The American male, in all his encounters with the American female, acts on the principle that he must 'assume a passion, if he has it not'. In the American drawing-room the costume of wolf is *de rigueur*. Even if it conceals the most lamb-like disposition.

However, as the party began to get under way, even the blondes must have been somewhat puzzled. It would be unfair to suggest that they had come prepared for the worst, for their bedizened exteriors were no true indication of their characters. But at least they had expected, as a Tribute to American Womanhood, a random pat, a fleeting pinch. They never got

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it. The distinction between theory and practice was complete. The theory, of course, was that orgies were in the air; the fact remained that the whole proceedings could safely have been filmed and used for educational purposes.

After the cocktails had done their wicked work, and the 'suggestive' conversation was flowing about as rapidly as an old-fashioned French coffee percolator, we trooped into dinner, to find the table covered with the usual multi-coloured shambles of flowers and glass which, in America, passes for table decoration. This display must have been as distressing to Otto Kahn as it was to me, for once, when he was regarding a mountain of maltreated roses towering over a ballet of *hors-d'œuvres*, he sighed and said: 'We Americans do not deserve to have flowers; we *torture* them.' However, it was all part of the pattern, and he endured it for the sake of his guests. There were orchids for the ladies, cruelly wired, which were seized by the men and pinned on to their partners — to the accompaniment of a positive fusilade of 'suggestiveness'. There were gigantic centre-pieces, sometimes sweet, sometimes savoury, but always strongly reminiscent of the Albert Memorial.

There were scores of glasses, tinted in 'art' shades — green for white wine, pink for red, and pale yellow for champagnes — all the colours, in fact, most calculated to flatten even the most delicate of vintages.

Then the fun began.

Our host would turn to Rosy — or Dolly, or Poppy, or whoever it might be — and devour her with an expression almost as amorous as might be assumed by the chairman of a very recalcitrant board meeting.

'The cinematograph . . .' he would begin, with uplifted finger.

'Oh yeah!' crooned Rosy. 'I just *love* the movies.'

'The cinematograph . . .' he would repeat, frowning at this interruption, 'is one of the . . .'

'Oh gee!' gurgled Rosy. 'I should just say it is. I'd like to meet anybody who said it wasn't. I surely would.' (A bright girl, Rosy.)

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Our host's eyes closed in pain. The sort of pain that stabs the aforesaid chairman when the board meeting gets too recalcitrant. But he was not to be deterred.

'The cinematograph . . .' he persisted, 'is one of the greatest educational forces of the twentieth century.'

Even Rosy, by this time, would be slightly damped, and would respond by patting her back hair and pouting, and wondering what on earth she could reply to such a statement, and wondering, even more, why nobody was grabbing her by the knee.

The voice of Otto Kahn boomed on; he was often talking excellent sense and sometimes, in his visions of the future, he was inspired; but the incongruous nature of his audience — together with the fact that he considered it necessary to interlard his monologues with little gallantries and naughtinesses for the benefit of Rosy — somewhat detracted from the force of his arguments. Meanwhile all of us were doing our best, in our various ways, chuckling, and saying, 'Ah' and 'Oh', about nothing in particular together with such phrases as, 'You've got me all wrong, little girl'.

And indeed, the little girls would have been justified in thinking that they *had* got us all wrong. Not a pass, not a grab, not even a dig in the ribs. Only this spectral conversation, this passionless parade, and this inordinate quantity of alcohol. As the evening drew on they used to cast bewildered glances into the mirrors, examining themselves as though to discover whether their faces had slipped or their hair had come down.

Then the clock struck. It was the signal for Otto Kahn to rise, to say a few graceful words to the ladies — salted, of course, with a little delicate impropriety — and then, for us all to troop out, on the way home to the station, where the sleeping-car, bridge, whisky and soda and other masculine delights awaited us. Needless to say, the partings were protracted; it was only common courtesy that we should put up a last pretence of unslaked lust; and so there would be faint scufflings and embraces and even a half-hearted pinch on the behind, in the Victorian mode. But that was all; and a few minutes later

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eight bemused blondes would be left alone, staring at each other with mutual suspicion, wondering if by some mischance they had come to the wrong party, and had inadvertently been entertaining a band of itinerant monks.

However, consolation awaited them. For always, when we had gone, the courier had the pleasure of requesting them to look under their plates. Fearing a final disillusionment, they did so. And then, there were tweeps and twitters of delight.

For under each plate was a hundred-dollar note.

In view of the singular manner in which it was earned, I suspect that some of them had it framed.

The climax of our amorous adventures came in New Orleans.

By some happy chance, our arrival in this city was unhampered by the assistance of any blondes. Whether there had been a hitch in the arrangements, or whether Otto Kahn had decided that we might be left to fend for ourselves, I cannot guess; all that mattered was that for once in a way we were able to dine in comparative sanity, without racking our brains for 'suggestiveness'.

The respite was short-lived. Otto Kahn's anxiety to please, and his apparently ineradicable conviction that we must all be breathing heavily with suppressed desire—which indeed, in my case, was true, for even the sight of a blonde aroused a fervent desire to escape—led him to arrange a final orgy of wickedness on our second day.

'Tonight,' he proclaimed at dinner, 'we are going to see the night life of New Orleans. And I have taken the liberty of providing you with charming companions.'

'Oh dear,' I groaned to myself, 'they're back again.' And I looked over my shoulder to see if the familiar peroxide cavalcade was already approaching. But there was nobody but a coloured waiter, on whose features I beamed with affection.

Then came a succession of startling anti-climaxes.

'I myself shall not be able to accompany you,' said Otto Kahn, with an assumption of regret which deceived nobody for an instant. 'I have some important business to attend to.'

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Hardly had he said this than Jim Bush and David Gray also excused themselves. Hastily attaching to their faces expressions which they fondly imagined to be libidinous, they both asserted that they had 'dates'. They accompanied this obvious lie with a number of winks, to impress upon us the evil nature of their appointments.

Otto Kahn looked quite pained, like a kind uncle who has had his sweetmeats rejected by ungrateful children. However, he quickly cheered up.

'Well,' he said, 'boys will be boys! And that means that there will be all the more for the rest of you to choose from!'

The rest of us stared at each other with ill-concealed dismay. For we were now reduced to Rudolf Kommer, Ruspoli, the two elderly gentlemen and myself. Rudolf would certainly be no help at all, for, as usual, he was dreaming of Lady Diana Cooper, and the very thought of any other member of the female species would be quite sacrilegious. Ruspoli, again, would be a very poor ally, for he was more than half asleep, and, in any case, had little *penchant* for blondes. As for the two elderly gentlemen, they were both suffering from such acute indigestion that they hardly knew what was going on. Their tongues were quite black with the amount of charcoal biscuits which they were consuming. I had a momentary inspiration that perhaps we could use them — (the tongues) — for putting out at the blondes and frightening them all away.

It therefore seemed highly probable that the entire bunch of blondes would descend, with a loud report, upon my frail shoulders. And that was exactly what happened.

When dinner was over we went out into the hall to await the arrival of the charmers. Then the mass desertion began. Otto Kahn, with a final benediction, waved us good night and disappeared into the elevator. Jim Bush and David Gray pushed on their hats and hurried through the swing-doors to see 'the night-life of New Orleans' from a quiet corner of the Union Club. Ruspoli yawned quite shamelessly, and went to bed.

I turned to Rudolf. 'This is terrible . . .' I began. And then . . . 'Where are you going?' For he too was beginning to drift away.



## STUDY IN BLONDE

'I shall be back in a moment,' he lied.

In growing alarm I looked round for the two elderly gentlemen. They had disappeared — wafting themselves mysteriously away on clouds of indigestion.

I was quite alone.

At precisely that moment, through the swing-doors swirled two of the largest blondes upon which the human eye can ever have rested — quickly followed by two more, and again two more, and yet again two more. One had the impression of an avalanche of tulle and spangles pushing itself irresistibly forward, surmounted by a bobbing crest of bloneness.

Panic seized me. Already, in the wake of the avalanche, I could see the diminutive figure of the courier, looking like a rather frightened keeper at a circus where the animals had got out of control. He was staring about him in search of his eight Lotharios.

There was not a moment to lose. Turning quickly round I slunk into the shadow of a potted palm, paused for a moment, and then, holding my handkerchief to my face, walked swiftly to the nearest exit. By a happy chance there was a sign over it — a sign in discreet red letters — the single word, 'Toilet'. But to me it meant, 'Sanctuary'.

It was only when we arrived at Hollywood that the blonde menace abated. Otto Kahn evidently decided, with a sigh of relief, that he had done his duty by his guests, and that in future they could be left to provide their own ration of *l'amour*. Thus relieved, the party became gayer than it had ever been, and our host revealed himself as the enchanting person he was — generous, witty and warm-hearted. And I could not help observing that most of his female friends were sedate, middle-aged, and firmly brunette.

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I HAD such fun in the States that a few months later — early in 1928 — I accepted an offer to return to New York as editor of the *American Sketch*. It was the most foolish thing I have ever done in my life — apart from trying to grow rhododendrons in a lime soil.

It was really the fault of George Doran, my American publisher. Doran was a great publisher, but he often had crazy notions. For instance, in a moment of expansion he suddenly decided to have marble busts made of all his favourite authors, and later on, when the slump came, the firm was staggered by the bills for these lavish commissions coming home to roost. The only bust I remember was a rather suety replica of Arnold Bennett, who was permitted to stare coldly out on to Madison Avenue for a few months, before being relegated to the basement.

The offer was made after a very lavish dinner at the Savoy. I am never very good at refusing things, particularly if I have had a few drinks, and George made his scheme sound irresistible. There he sat, looking very benign and elegant, with his long white fingers stroking his short white beard, which just touched his white *piqué* tie — (bought, of course, at Hawes and Curtis, for he was a snob about English clothes) — telling me to ‘go West, young man’.

‘How would you like to edit an American magazine?’ he demanded, out of the blue. And then before I had time to say that I would not like it at all, he had launched out on one of those amazing American sales talks which, to people like me, are utterly overwhelming.

The firm of George Doran and Company, it seemed, were very impressed by the success of the *New Yorker*. As indeed they might be, for this high-powered, streamlined little magazine was flashing ahead of its rivals like a racing automobile, com-

pulling the attention of the crowd by its irreverent tootings, breaking all the journalistic traffic rules . . . and if I continue this metaphor it will end in tears, so we will leave it at that.

'What was the reason for the success of the *New Yorker*?' demanded Doran. If he had waited I could have told him some of the answers, chief among which was the fact that Harold Ross, its editor, was not a man at all, but a leprechaun, who had swallowed an electric dynamo. But Doran did not wait. He wagged his finger at me. 'Sophistication!' he cried. 'Brittleness!' And for several minutes the air crackled with these musty attributes of the late 'twenties, while he regarded me with a paternal eye, as the brittlest object in the immediate vicinity.

At this point I should, of course, have muttered a set piece about being highly honoured but feeling incapable, for the idea that I should edit a magazine to compete with the *New Yorker* was about as sensible as the suggestion that the Bishop of London should pop over to edit *Variety*. But by now Doran was in the full flood of his eloquence.

Was I not . . . he demanded . . . sophisticated? Was I not of superlative brittleness? Of course I was! It was no use shaking my head. What was that I'd said? Brought up in the traditions of *Punch*? Pshaw! Did I *like Punch*?

I had to admit that I did not like it very much.

'There you are!' he cried. 'You don't like *Punch*! That's half the battle. But —' he added, 'there's something to be said for the name. An American *Punch*! That's an idea.'

It certainly was. It had the same ringing assurance of success as if one had tried to flood the British market with a chewing gum entitled 'Queen Mary', but of course, I did not say so.

'Don't you *want* to make a fortune?'

I supposed that I did. Then he began to talk figures. And the figures really were so dazzling that I began to wonder if perhaps, after all, I was not being a little too apprehensive. All the same, it would be a terrific upheaval.

'What about Gaskin?' I asked.

'And who,' demanded Doran, 'is Gaskin?'

I enlarged upon Gaskin's perfections. As Doran listened, his

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eyes gleamed with appreciation. 'Bring him! By all means — bring him! The perfect British manservant! He will give atmosphere!'

I made a mental note to remind Gaskin to rub up his atmosphere. 'I shall have to let the house and store the furniture.'

'No — no! Bring the furniture! We will get you an apartment in New York. And the furniture will all help to build up the British background.'

I doubted this, as most of it was French, and very bad French too, and I did not see how a few rather rickety Louis Seize commodes could help to conjure up a vision of the shires. However, Doran had so infected me with his own enthusiasm that it seemed ungracious even to think of such details, in view of the American triumph which, he assured me, was already almost 'in the bag'.

And indeed, many soberer young men might have had their heads turned by his salesmanship. The magazine was there, waiting for me. True, at the moment it was dormant, selling only a few thousand copies a month. But all that it needed was that I should go over and breathe upon it my brittle breath, and it would leap into a new and vigorous life.

'And then,' said Doran, 'we shall see!'

We should, indeed.

### § 11

If I had suspected, even dimly, how ludicrous and ruinous a failure this venture was destined to prove, I should never have got off the boat. But it would have needed a shrewder sense than mine to guess the rocks that lay ahead. How was I to know that George Doran was a man whose native optimism had developed to almost pathological proportions? The publishing business was booming; the presses of the nation were working overtime, pouring out a ceaseless spate of books and magazines; there seemed no limit to the gold which America was prepared to pay for words — mere words. How was I to divine the flimsy foundations on which this apparently eternal structure of wealth

was being created — the deep fissures which were already spreading under the steel and concrete of Wall Street? It was late summer when I arrived, the fall of the leaf would soon be on its way, but for me, and countless others, America seemed to be held in a trance of changeless spring.

But it was not Doran's optimism, nor Wall Street's instability which was to prove my undoing, but my own incompetence, which was made all the more glaringly apparent by the fact that I was promptly publicized, throughout the New York press, as the last word in all those crisp and glittering qualities which the New Yorker is rightly inclined to regard as his own speciality, and in which I was, at heart, so sadly deficient. Admittedly, I had given the publicity people plenty of excuse for their build-up; *Twenty-Five* had been impudent enough, and *Crazy Pavements* had been 'smart' in the sense that it had been an accurate picture of a small and rococo section of Mayfair society. But only stark failure could attend any attempt to match my Oxford-cum-Fleet-Street brand of humour, which was in the old British tradition of leisurely under-statement, against the machine-gun fire of American wit.

Before the storm broke there were a few weeks of comparative calm, which I spent in house-hunting. Through no desire to 'build up a British background' but from a native longing for peace and quiet, I rented a charming apartment on the top floor of an old brown-stone house in East 46th Street. From the back windows one had a view of trees and tumbled roofs which reminded me of Hampstead. When the furniture arrived from England I sold most of it and bought some pleasant pieces of solid, early Victorian mahogany.

'It really would be quite like home,' said Gaskin, 'if only we could make a cup of tea.'

But that is something which, in New York, is beyond the power of man. We had the same teapot, the same tea, even the same kettle, and we made it in precisely the same way, but the result was not tea. Admittedly it was not quite so revolting as the amber emetic which to the American passes as tea, but it was revolting enough. And in spite of George Doran, who

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urgently reminded me that I should be expected, as an Englishman, to drink tea in large quantities, and that people would be very disappointed if they did not find me at all hours of the day with a cup of tea in one hand and a copy of *The Times* in another — whistling, presumably, 'God Save the King' beneath my breath — we drank no more. We kept to coffee which, in America, is nectar.

I linger over this cup of tea for only one reason — to avoid the horrors which lurk ahead. But they can be shirked no longer.

They were all summed up in a quite appalling cocktail party which George Doran persuaded me to give to the New York press as soon as he felt that the moment was ripe.

No American journalist who attended that lugubrious function could fail to regard me, for ever afterwards, as the epitome of all pains in the neck. Once again I was forewarned to be 'smart' in every possible way — smart in appearance, smart in manner, smart in repartee. It was suggested that I would do well to be particularly 'brittle' about American women, whom I was expected to criticize with unbridled *élan*. In other words, I was to be something between a gigolo and a piece of cellophane.

And the tragedy of it all was that in my eagerness to oblige, my old-fashioned anxiety to earn the large salary they were paying for this protracted crucifixion, I endeavoured to carry out these instructions to the letter. Had I been playing my true self, the journalists would have discovered me with large quantities of flowers, a whisky and soda, and as many Siamese cats as could be legally collected in one room. That, you may suggest, would in itself have formed a sufficiently repellent picture; but it would have been as nothing to the picture that was actually presented to them. Only by the sternest exercise of will-power was I able to refuse the suggestion that I should wear a monocle. All the other accoutrements of the smarty and the arriviste were there in profusion — cocktails in dreadful Lalique glasses, quantities of very odd cactuses, stacks of photographs of myself in a dressing-gown, looking as though I were about to be very properly arrested for peddling cocaine.

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Against this shattering background I performed heroically for some three hours, keeping up a constant prattle of bad epigrams and racking my brains for fresh quips about American women. The journalists, on the following day, were surprisingly restrained in their comments. They would have been quite justified if they had demanded my immediate deportation.

### § III

My first trouble, as an editor, was dogs.

However, perhaps that is anticipating. The dogs will have to wait for a moment while I explain the 'set-up'.

This was so simple as to be almost non-existent. At one end of the great offices of Doran and Company in Madison Avenue, there was a small room with a glass door. Thither, one morning, George Doran conducted me, opened the door, bowed, waved me to a desk, assured me that if there was anything in the world I wanted, it was mine to command, bowed again, and went out. I was left alone — to edit.

Now, what on earth does one do, in such circumstances? How does one begin, and where, and what with, and why? I had no secretary; I had no budget; I had not met a single contributor. True, there had been a rather hurried directors' meeting in which a number of people had suggested a 'policy', but as far as I could make out, their only policy was that there should be produced, at the shortest possible moment, a magazine of such startling brilliance that the *New Yorker* would appear as outmoded as a copy of *Punch* in the days of Du Maurier. What did one *do*?

Then there was a knock on the door and in came X. I call him X not because I want to say anything nasty about him, but because for the life of me I cannot remember his name. All that I can remember was that he had a moustache and always looked very sad. X was my assistant editor. He had been on the old *Sketch* and, I think, rather resented my importation; he probably felt — quite rightly — that he should have been editor himself.

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X seemed as vague as I was about what one was to *do*. (The word 'do' is italicized to emphasize its physical quality; I had an urgent desire to ring somebody up and buy something that we could put in. But whom? And what?) He knew what had been done in the past. 'But that,' he sighed, 'is all over now. Everything is changed.' He sounded like something out of Tchekov.

'Supposing we go through the old paper and see what we can cut out?'

'I expect that everything will be cut out — nothing will be the same any more.' Really, I thought, he should be playing Uncle Vanya.

And that is where the dogs came in.

I turned over the pages of the old *Sketch*. It was of petrifying dullness. It seemed to consist largely of snapshots of people popping on and off steamers, and its *pièce de résistance*, in the latest number, was a large set-piece of Gracie Vanderbilt, lurking rather sullenly behind a funnel. But even worse than the text were the advertisements. These were almost nothing but dogs. Column after column, page upon page, of dogs. Wire-haired terriers, bulldogs, blue-roan cockers, Scotch collies, pomeranians, borzois, sheepdogs, alsatians, pekinese, pugs . . . a positive sea of dogs. They were all there, in every imaginable position, against every possible and impossible background, from elongated hounds silhouetted among Palladian columns, to hysterical spaniels flopping through the hay.

I am very fond of dogs — particularly if they are tough and humorous and lower-class — and I should be even fonder if it were not for cats. I am pro-cat for all sorts of reasons — their elegance, their mystery, and the subtle and feminine quality of their affections — but perhaps the principal reason I am pro-cat is because cats are a persecuted race. Unlike dogs, they have no legal status, and in a world of fools they are little understood. At the risk of sounding Irish, I am on the side of the cat because I am on the side of the under-dog.

Nevertheless, I love dogs. However, there is a limit to the sacrifices one can make for one's affections. And it seemed to



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me more than a little incongruous that I should attempt to produce a magazine of 'subtle and sophisticated elegance' in an atmosphere of the kennels. It would be like trying to play Debussy with a St. Bernard chained to each wrist.

I hinted as much to X.

'You know,' I began, 'all these dogs . . .'

'They're the one thing that makes the paper pay,' he observed, with a deep sigh.

'All the same, they do rather cramp one's style.'

'Why? They won't be on the same page as your copy.'

'Perhaps not. But if I'm going to write about . . . well . . . social things and the theatre and cosmopolitans and all that racket . . . it rather puts one off to have to do it against a fusillade of barks.'

Gloom, silence, sighs.

'I mean,' I went on, 'it would be better to have some scent or something. Wouldn't it?'

More sighs.

'And mink coats. Don't you think? And expensive liqueurs.'

A sigh from the very depths.

'Not that I want to cut out all the dogs. . . .'

'They pay,' he groaned.

'Yes,' I continued, in growing desperation, 'I'm sure they do; but I do want to keep some sense of proportion. One borzoi to one bottle of Schiaparelli. One spaniel to one sable. Just to remind people that the name of the paper isn't "Canine Comments".'

In the end we won our fight against the dogs; we even came near to producing a magazine which had, I believe, a certain ragged distinction. If this belief is correct the credit must go to a young man called Ray —, whom I persuaded Doran to engage as my secretary.

Ray is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met; only America could have produced him.

Let us listen to his story.

## § I V

I can best tell the tale of Ray by switching the clock forward eight years, to a quiet corner of a New York restaurant. The year is 1936; the days of the *American Sketch* are long past; Ray has a respectable position in the Library of Congress; and even I have at last begun to show signs of a dawning adolescence.

We have been laughing a good deal at old memories, and indulging in fanciful speculations about the sort of magazine we should really like to produce one day. Coffee is finished; it is time to pay the bill.

Suddenly Ray says: 'By the way, there's something I would like to show you.'

He leans over the back of his chair and reaches for his attaché case. It is a pretty bulky object, but that is only to be expected from a librarian.

He undoes the straps and slowly opens the case. There is revealed a mass of letters.

'Fan mail?'

'Not exactly. You can read one, if you like. You'll be the only man who's ever done so.'

Puzzled, and not a little intrigued, I choose a letter at random. The envelope bears a foreign stamp but the postmark is so black and heavy that I cannot trace its origin. The handwriting seems vaguely familiar; it is bold, free and highly individual; one would have said that the writer had used a thick quill, one would also have guessed that he — or she — had been trained to write in the German script.

I open the letter and begin to read. At once I feel in the grip of a powerful personality. The writer is a woman — and she is in deep distress. But there is more to it than that. For as I read on, I gather that she must also be a person of very exceptional status; the scenes she is describing are such as few could be privileged to witness. A phrase catches my eye: 'As I stood by the bier of the dead King . . .'

I can no longer contain my curiosity. I turn to the end of the letter.

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It is signed with the single word, 'Marie'. And underneath are the words: 'I wonder if you realize how much I am trusting you?'

'Not . . . not Marie of Roumania?'

He nods.

'*All* those letters?'

'Yes.' And then . . . 'May I have it back, please?' I hand it to him. He smoothes it out, and returns it, reverently, to the attaché case.

'One day,' he says, 'those letters will be part of history.'

### § v

And this is how it all began.

One day, towards the end of the First World War, an over-worked schoolmarm was sitting in a certain obscure classroom in New York City, racking her brains trying to think of a subject for the weekly essay. 'My ideal holiday?' No, they'd done that. 'What I shall be when I grow up?' They'd done that too — and anyway, who cared?

Then she had a brain-wave. After all, there was a war on, and though the children would never be involved in it, they ought to be made to think about it occasionally. So she cleared her throat, and announced that the subject for the weekly essay would be: 'The most interesting personality of the world war.'

Whereupon, twenty-nine out of the thirty boys and girls in the class immediately dipped their pens in the inkpot and began to write about General Pershing.

But the thirtieth boy happened to be Ray, and he had other ideas, for he was an incurable romantic. You would not have thought so to look at him. He had a pleasant, open face, with big brown eyes, but he was not especially handsome. He was neither very tall nor very short, neither very dark nor very fair. His voice was gentle; his manner diffident; he was the last person whom you would pick out from a crowd.

Yet he had this queer romantic streak, and with it, an extraordinary capacity for hero-worship. If he had been born in

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another age he might well have been a troubador — singing softly, in the shadows, outside windows whose bars would never be lifted. And now — as he held his pen over the paper — he knew very well that there was only one person of whom he could write. He must write of the woman whose lovely face had bewitched him in the newspapers, whose stormy legend had captured his imagination. He must write of Queen Marie of Roumania.

It was a good essay, for though it was written in the language of a schoolboy, it was fired with the ardour of a man. It was so good that the schoolmarm decided that she would send it to the Queen. (To none but an American schoolmarm could such an audacious idea have occurred.) So she put it in an envelope, addressed it to 'Her Majesty the Queen, Roumania', and that — one would have thought — would have been the end of it.

But it was not the end of it. For the envelope made safe passage across the perilous waters of the Atlantic, and through the embattled lands of Europe, and eventually landed on the Queen's desk in Bucharest. She read it, and was touched. What a charming little boy! He deserved a photograph. She reached for one from the nearest pile, scribbled her signature across it, and dropped it in the 'out' tray.

Little did she realize that with that careless gesture she was beginning the most prolonged, the most intensive, and the most profoundly revealing correspondence of her life. For when Ray received that photograph, something happened to him. The little schoolboy became a man — a man, moreover, devoted to a single ideal, with one absorbing and passionate loyalty. He replied to her letter, and evidently something of his adoration must have betrayed itself, for she wrote back. Again he wrote, and again she replied; little by little this strange intimacy became more and more precious to her, until, in the end, when she felt the need of pouring out her most secret thoughts, it was not to her husband that she went, nor to her son, but to this obscure young American, sitting quietly at his desk in Washington, worshipping her in secret.

They never met; they had not even the desire to meet; theirs

was a completely spiritual relationship. Years later, when I was passing through Bucharest, Queen Marie summoned me to see her; we dined alone and talked far into the night. And it was largely of Ray that we talked.

'I have never even seen a photograph of him,' she said. 'I have often wondered how he looks. No . . . please do not tell me. It does not matter, anyway.' She smiled to herself, as though conjuring up a picture of him in her mind's eye.

Then she said: 'When I am dead, I have told him that if he ever comes to Europe I would like him to come to Roumania, and to go out to Balcic, where I have my palace by the Black Sea. There is a little private chapel there. And I would like him to toll the bell, just once, in memory.'

But it was not to Roumania that Ray went, when he took his next trip to Europe. It was to France, as an ordinary G.I. And now he is back again in the Library of Congress, middle-aged, scholarly — and as diffident as ever. You would not think that he, and he alone, had been chosen to keep the secrets of one of the loveliest and most spectacular women of the twentieth century.

Yes. A very American story.

## § V I

All this, however, is a far fling from the editorial sanctum.

When I asked for Ray as my secretary, although I knew of his adoration for the Queen, I had no idea that he was in personal touch with her. And even if I had known, it would not have affected matters. We were both too bemused and bewildered to think of anything but the magazine.

Unfortunately, Ray, though he had a good brain and a delicate sense of humour, knew as little about the technical side of the thing as I did. He was able to get rid of a few of the dog columns, and even managed to procure a perfume advertisement — it showed a tiny flask of Chanel Number Five entirely surrounded by gigantic borzois. But the paper, for some reason or other, continued to look most unpleasant.

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We did not know how to fit the pictures into the text, nor what size they should be, nor if they should go in straight or crooked or sideways. However, we made the most valiant efforts.

'We ought to have a dummy,' said Ray, after a few days.

Misunderstanding him, I said yes, and let's make it look like George Doran and throw darts at it.

Ray was not amused. 'A dummy copy of the magazine,' he explained, 'to show where everything goes.'

So we made a dummy. Indeed, we made dozens of dummies. But something always seemed to go wrong with them. Usually the pages stuck together, owing to a too liberal application of paste, with the result that when one prised them open one gazed upon a mutilated portrait of Mrs. Harrison Williams with half her nose torn off, looking as though she were in an advanced stage of leprosy.

Nothing fitted; every article was either too long or too short.

'Why does nobody ever write anything the proper length?' I demanded in exasperation. 'The damn thing's full of holes.'

Ray, with great wisdom, suggested that we ought to have a lot of 'fills' — little drawings, poems, wise-cracks, etc., which we could put in the holes.

'But we can't ring up somebody like Upton Sinclair and ask him to write something that we can put in a hole. He'd think it very rude. Besides, he'd want a quarry.'

'We must collect them,' said Ray, with infinite patience.

'Where do we get them?'

'Anywhere. Old copies of other magazines, newspaper files, snippets. And then when any artist comes in with a portfolio, we can buy one drawing on condition that he throws in all the bits and pieces that artists always seem to stick in the back of their portfolios. You know — the back view of a cat — a man standing under a lamp-post and all that.'

This sounded very professional, 'just like the *New Yorker*', and so it became part of our 'policy'. Unfortunately, very few artists ever presented themselves. We sat for hours in the office, day after day, waiting to be called upon by unknown geniuses,

but we waited in vain. The only people who came along were beery old men who barged into the office unannounced, and after banging their folders on my desk, flung them open to reveal large quantities of flesh-pink nudes, pirouetting above captions of quite sickening ineptitude — like, ‘Catch me if you can!’

We began to grow desperate. I said to Ray, ‘We’re getting nothing at all. I’d better go and see Doran about it.’

So I saw Doran about it; indeed, I saw him again and again, ‘but evermore came out by that same door wherein I went’. He was a bundle of charm, he was graciousness personified, and he was lovely to look at — snow-white hair, pink cheeks, immaculate linen. And he made the most beautiful gestures, like an old-fashioned dancing master; when he waved me to a chair he did it with such grace and such conviction that I almost tripped up on the rug. But once in the chair, nothing seemed to happen. No brass tacks, nothing but empty courtesies.

‘It would all be wonderful . . .’ waving his hand to the left.

‘I have implicit confidence in you . . .’ waving his hand to the right.

‘We must lunch one day at the Colony and discuss it . . .’ waving both hands at once.

Whereupon, I was waved to the door. We both had so much poise that it is a wonder we did not fall over backwards.

Perhaps I am being unfair to Doran. After all, I was only a tiny cog in a gigantic machine which his genius had created — a machine which for many years he had controlled almost single-handed. Today the machine was going through the inevitable labour pains arising from its amalgamation with the firm of Doubleday, Page and Co. He had many things to think about, of far greater importance than my little magazine. So had Nelson. Both men treated me, from start to finish, with real kindness and generosity. The one thing I needed, technical direction, they were simply too busy to give me.

## § VII

As I could not find any new artists, I decided to fall back on the old. I used to prowl round the Washington Square district, exploring the little stores where they sold unusual prints and rare European etchings. Here, sometimes, for a few dollars I would pick up a drawing which appealed to me, and bear it back to the office in triumph, thinking out a caption on the way home. No more amateurish method of editing a magazine could possibly be imagined, but that was how it was. And though it was haphazard and ridiculous, it sometimes bore results.

Thus, one morning, in a tiny basement store in the shadow of the Square, I rediscovered the work of that remarkable genius George Grosz, who in those days was almost unknown to the American public. The immediate impact of Grosz on a mind that is unprepared for him is painful. It is an effect that might be compared to the drawings of a lunatic on the walls of a public lavatory. But after a while, his magic slowly reveals itself, his strange, scratchy lines begin to flow, to link themselves in rhythmic design, his evil, hideous figures jerk into life, and move, and in moving they create patterns of beauty. And suddenly one finds oneself in a world of grim fascination — a nightmare world, it is true, but of intense reality.

When I first presented Grosz's drawings to the board of directors, they were dismayed; it was impossible that the firm of Doubleday Doran could give its imprint to such atrocities. However, I persisted; I even induced them to use a particularly horrifying drawing as one of the covers. We reversed the blacks and whites, so that it gave the effect of a picture done on slate by an imp of special perversity.

A strongly morbid streak began to make its appearance in our pages. I suppose this was my fault — if it *was* a fault. It seemed that an artist had only to enter our office to be plunged into gloom, and to reappear, a few days later, bearing a portfolio bulging with death's-heads. This was true even of a comedian like Soglow, whose strip of 'The Little King' was, in those days,



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one of the most popular features of the *New Yorker*. I asked Soglow to come and see me, hoping that we might concoct something as amusing as 'The Little King'. But after barely five minutes' conversation we were both on the verge of tears, overwhelmed by the darkness and terror of life. And instead of 'The Little King', Soglow drew, at my suggestion, an illustration to the caption, 'I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls'. It showed a vista of dark pillars, with the light of dawn creeping through them, and in the foreground the dwarf figure of an old charwoman, bent over her scrubbing-brush in an attitude of despair. It was a masterly piece of work but it was in no sense gay.

I tried to relieve the gloom of the pictures by the brightness of the text. But even here, my authors, after the briefest interview, developed an apparently irresistible urge to moan and rail against the awfulness of everything under the sun. Hoffenstein was one of these. His *Poems in Praise of Practically Nothing* was a current best-seller; he had an acid wit and he bubbled with high spirits; he seemed an ideal contributor. This is what happened to his high spirits when he wrote for *me*. His first poem — 'The Infant' — begins with the couplet:

The tiny infant does not know  
Its own capacity for woe

and then — after asking the question:

Who would have thought so small a chalice  
Could interest the cold earth's malice?

it concludes with the injunction:

Oh give the wretched creature gas  
And it will gladly go to grass!  
Oh hang it high and let it be  
As innocent again and free!

The case for infanticide was never more neatly turned; but again, it was not gay.

It remained for me to see what I could do, of my own accord, to brighten things up. It was not very much; my position was

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

intolerably delicate. For though, as an editor, I was expected to sparkle in an intimate and sarcastic vein, as an Englishman I was reluctant to criticize too sharply the country in which I was a guest; and as an individual I had many friends in those social circles which were the most obvious targets for parody. It was a question of being a bore or a bounder, and doubtless there were occasions when I succeeded in being both.

But sometimes an opportunity presented itself so rich in satirical possibilities that I threw caution to the winds. Such was the case of Mrs. Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte. (People really do go about with names like that in the U.S.A.) The features of this lady were suddenly blazoned across America over an astonishing advertisement issued by the house of Alfred Knopf, the publisher of many of the best writers of the day, some of whom were included in a series called 'Borzoi Books'.

The advertisement read as follows:

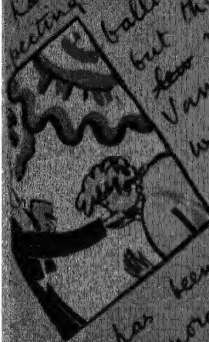
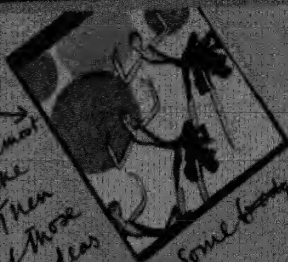
MRS. JEROME NAPOLEON BONAPARTE  
PROMINENT IN THE SOCIETY OF  
NEW YORK  
NEWPORT  
PALM BEACH  
IS AN ENTHUSIASTIC ADMIRER OF BORZOI BOOKS

This was too much; the Emperor Napoleon, Palm Beach, and literary taste was just a little too fantastic to pass by. How so reputable a publisher as Knopf could make such a *gaffe* is, to this day, a mystery, but having made it, he could not expect to escape the consequences. It was as though a musical critic had recommended the work of a new composer because a duchess was sitting in the front row of the stalls.

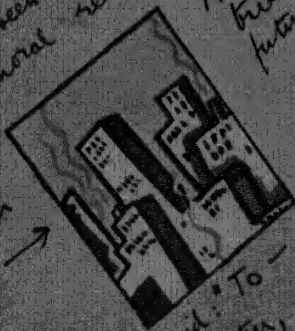
I will not transcribe the rather lengthy diatribe I delivered against this advertisement — which included a suggestion that Mrs. Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte applied the blindfold test to Borzoi Books, and promptly swooned if any other sort of book was placed in her hand. But the concluding passage, in the present mood of America, has some topical value. I reprint it for what it is worth:

# The American SKETCH

is rather  
amiable, but  
cover does, not seem  
have arrived. We were  
expecting something with  
balloons on it. e.g. →



but that looked almost  
Vanity Fair. Then  
we had one of those  
faintly risqué ideas  
← a la New Yorker, by  
stolen from the office by  
somebody with  
a sense of moral responsibility.



And then we  
tried the  
futuristic stunt



we tried  
the skyscraper  
stunt: →

And then we said: "To - with it all. What  
does a cover matter, anyhow?"  
Our publishers, by the way,  
wonder if we know what  
it is all about. B.N.  
as this magazine is published  
with a certain amount of  
reputation. By the way,  
Parker & Co. Inc.,  
Garden City,  
New York

THE FIRST NUMBER OF 'THE AMERICAN SKETCH'



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The most repellent aspect of this advertisement is the fact that it constitutes the greatest snub ever offered to an author. Think of it in concrete terms. A young man writes a book. He writes it with his heart's blood. All that he can imagine of grace is gathered between the covers of that book. The book is published. Every review, to him, is a blow or a caress. And then one day he sees in the papers the portrait of a lady who is 'prominent in the society of New York, Newport and Palm Beach'. And simply for this reason his book is recommended. If ever success turns to ashes in a man's mouth it must be at a moment like this.

However, even this, as you will agree, was not overpoweringly gay.

### § VIII

In a moment we will leave the American *Sketch*, with as deep a sigh of relief as I left it myself a few months later. (This sigh was certainly echoed even more deeply by Doran and Doubleday.) But first I would like to tell the story of the strangest of all the contacts which it gave me — the story of my meeting with that lusty, roistering buccaneer of literature, Frank Harris.

One morning I was sitting in the office, surrounded by the usual piles of dog advertisements, when the telephone rang, and a mysterious voice at the other end inquired:

'Are you alone?'

'Yes. Who is it?'

'There is nobody else there?'

'No. Who is it?'

There was a long pause, and a sound like a muffled hiccup. Then the voice replied: 'Frank Harris.'

If he had said, 'Queen Anne', I could not have been more surprised.

'The Frank Harris? I didn't know you were in America.'

'Officially I'm not. That's why I asked if you were alone. It might be awkward if people knew.' Another pause, and this time the sound of the hiccup was unmistakable. 'Can you

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lunch with me today? No? After lunch then? At three o'clock?"

I found that I could manage it, and scribbled the address on my pad. It was nearly four o'clock before I arrived at his apartment, but he was still lunching, or rather drinking. Two empty bottles of Barsac stood at the end of the long dining-table; by his elbow was another bottle, nearly finished. There was also a bottle of brandy, which he offered to me, without rising. Two other people were at the table, one, a dim little man whose name I forget, the other his wife, equally dim, but with traces of faded beauty. Harris dominated the scene. He was very flushed, very loud-voiced, and very bitter in his comments on American editors, who were proving unresponsive to his wares. This was hardly surprising, as almost all that he had to offer them was advanced pornography.

Almost, but not quite; there were two exceptions. The first was a remarkable essay he had written on Wagner's relations with the mad King of Bavaria. It contained a verbatim report of a conversation between himself and Wagner on a winter's day in Berlin, where they had walked by the side of the frozen Wansee. The subject was absorbing, the prose tough and racy, and no sooner had I read it than I offered to buy it.

'Done!' cried Harris, slapping his fist on the table. 'Two hundred dollars?'

I agreed, and promised to send him a cheque in the morning; it was a moderate fee for such a piece of work. At least, I thought so at the time. It was only after I had sent the cheque (and after Harris had disappeared from New York) that I discovered there were two slight drawbacks to the article. Firstly, it was fictitious from start to finish. Secondly, it had already been published a few years before by another unsuspecting editor, with the most unfortunate and expensive results.

To return to the luncheon table. 'It isn't with that sort of chicken-food that I'm going to make my fortune over here,' said Harris, waving his hand at the Wagner article, which I was putting into my pocket. 'I've got a better card up my sleeve. I've got the ace of trumps.'

'What's that?'

'I've got the truth about Oscar and Bosie.'<sup>1</sup>

'I thought you'd already told it.'

'Not the intimate details.' He leered at me, purple and slit-eyed, like a satyr by Rubens. 'I didn't even *know* them till last summer. And then I got that damned fool of a Bosie to write me a letter giving away the whole works. I talked him into it, down at Nice. I said it was his duty to posterity. He fell for it. Lord! What fools these mortals be! That letter's upstairs at this moment, and I wouldn't sell it under ten thousand. I wouldn't even let anybody glance at it, under a thousand.'

We need not pursue the subject. The letter, I have good reason to believe, was genuine, but I don't know whether Harris ever sold it, and I don't very much care. All I care to remember is that at this moment, the whole tragedy of Wilde seemed to flash before me in an even bitterer light than usual. So it had come to this! This was the end of 'the perfect friendship', the love that was to have reflected the glory that was Greece . . . a couple of dirty pages of paper, traded for gain in an old lecher's bedroom in a back-street of New York. What a sonnet Wilde might have written about such a scene! Perhaps, indeed, he *had* written such a sonnet — the tragically prophetic poem which begins . . .

To drift with every passion, till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds may play,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?

<sup>1</sup> Lord Alfred Douglas.

## ON WITH THE DANCE

By all the rules of the game I should have been sobered and chastened when, one night early in 1929, I walked up the gangplank of the liner that was to take me back to England. I had flopped so loudly that the echoes could be heard on both sides of the Atlantic; I had drawn heavily on my inadequate savings; and I had no regular job.

But I was not in the least depressed. The cabin was full of flowers, Gaskin was hovering about with champagne, and quantities of charming people were coming and going. The atmosphere was one of success rather than of failure. How could it be otherwise in the magic air of New York, with its crystal tang, against the soaring, golden cliffs of the skyscrapers?

So little downcast was I that half-way across the Atlantic, in the middle of a fierce storm, I bought a country cottage. This somewhat improbable action was prompted by a paragraph in an old copy of the *New York Times* which I happened to pick up in the lounge. In the Social column there was an announcement of the death of John Borie. Now John Borie was the brother of Emily Ryerson, of whom I wrote in Chapter Seven, and among his possessions had been a very lovely old Tudor cottage in the county of Huntingdonshire, where Emily and I had once spent a few enchanted summer days. The memory of the garden had always haunted me, and suddenly, in the creaking, buffeted, overheated lounge, it seemed a haven of peace which I must possess. So I rushed off and sent a cablegram to Emily — (who, typically, was sojourning in Timbuctoo) — making her an offer for the cottage, which had been left to her.

It was at once the craziest and the most sensible action of my life. For it turned me, willynilly, into a gardener, and only in a garden can a man learn to live as he was meant to live, with his feet on the earth and his head in the clouds.



## ON WITH THE DANCE

However, it was not my new role as a landed proprietor, nor the accumulated effervescence of a year in America which made my homecoming so unseasonably sportive; rather was it the fact that I had a play in my pocket — a play, moreover, which was going into immediate production.

The play was called 'The Stag'; it was produced by Raymond Massey at the Globe Theatre on April 2nd, 1929; and since it was that dreariest of all things — a *succès d'estime*, and ran for only six weeks, there would seem to be no possible reason for referring to it. It happened, however, that 'The Stag', instead of dying a natural death, developed into a repertory favourite, and soon began to pop up in the most unexpected places. Among these places was Malvern, where it was chosen as one of the plays included in the Bernard Shaw festival. And since it was the means of bringing me into fairly close contact with Shaw for several days, I would like to recall a few light-hearted memories of him.

During the festival, Shaw, his wife and I were all staying at the same hotel. It was a tepid place, but the food was good, the beds were comfortable, and it was of a stunning respectability. It was mostly patronized by elderly female hypochondriacs, who rustled down to dinner as though they were going to the stake, sipped Malvern water through prune-prismy lips, and occasionally, in their more abandoned moments, suggested that somebody should pass the salt.

Into this curious setting Shaw would stalk, every evening at seven-thirty, followed by his wife. It seemed to be an unwritten convention among the other guests that nobody should look at him. The prune-prismy ladies averted their eyes, as though they had suddenly been confronted by a nude, and the elderly colonels pressed their noses deep into their copies of *The Times*, lest it should be thought that they were guilty of celebrity-hunting. Never had there been such an impressive exhibition of British tact. I did not attempt to emulate this politeness; I could never keep my eyes off him. For really, he was very good to look at. The cleanliness of the man! He was like snow and new linen sheets and cotton wool and red apples with the rain

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

on them. One felt that he must even smell delicious, like hay or pears.

Shaw evidently appreciated the convention that respected his anonymity; as he strode into dinner each night he was always clasp- ing a travel-book. Mrs. Shaw, in her turn, clutched a volume of economics. As they sat down, the travel book would be opened on his side of the table, and propped up against a bottle of Malvern water. On the other side, the procedure was identical. Never a word did they speak during dinner, and I have often thought that if more husbands and wives would follow their example there would be fewer unhappy marriages.

Shaw was at his best after breakfast. The snowy beard, the russet cheeks, the sparkling eyes — they all proclaimed health and sanity, as he paced about his little sitting-room. On the morning after the first night he delivered, without a break, a typically Shavian review of my play, which he said was far more daring than anything he had ever written himself — and as the first act opened, with a bang, on a plot to procure abortion, maybe he was right. He had an interesting theory about characterization. He said: 'Your central character — the spouting sentimental old tragedian — is quite preposterous. Overdrawn from start to finish. And that is an admirable fault in a young dramatist. It shows you can invent as well as observe. I'm constantly accused of writing plays as though I were merely transcribing shorthand notes of real life. But if some of my characters walked off the stage and mingled with society they'd cause explosions right and left.'

Here are three little gossip paragraphs about him.

One. He said he believed in miracles. 'The other day I wanted a text from the Old Testament that I couldn't find in any concordance. I hadn't the foggiest idea what book it was in, and I'm past the age where I can sit down and read the entire Old Testament over again — though I *have* read it, which is probably more than you can say. So I went out for a walk, hoping that I might somehow remember it. I climbed to the top of the hill and saw a seat which looked inviting. I walked towards it. On the seat was lying a Salvation Army pamphlet —

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one of the "How to be Saved" variety. I picked it up and glanced at it. And there in the very first paragraph was the text I had been seeking.'

He asked, with a twinkle: 'If that is not an act of God, what is?'

Two. This is very gossipy indeed. It is merely a memory I have of Shaw signing his autograph. It was after a lunch at Lady Astor's house in St. James's Square, a year or two later. The lunch was in honour of the Archduchess Ileana of Roumania. As we were taking our leave in the hall she produced a copy of *Man and Superman*, and asked him to sign it. Without a moment's hesitation he wrote: 'To Ileana, Archduchess, from Bernard Shaw, Arch-playwright.'

Three. The most gossipy of them all. It is a sidelight on one of Shaw's endearing vanities. Not long ago, after a severe illness, my hair began to come out in handfuls, and I went for treatment to the celebrated Bertha Hammond in Bond Street. For more years than it would be discreet to mention, Miss Hammond has washed, pummelled and pounded the most distinguished pates in Britain, informing them bluntly that all she ever uses is soap, water and common sense, and that if their hair is falling out they must be deficient in one or other of these commodities. It is enough to say that Shaw has long been one of her most honoured clients. It is a pleasant picture — the noble brow bent over the washbasin — suffering the maternal admonitions of Miss Hammond who, of course, adores him.

Over Shaw's mantelpiece in Whitehall Court was the slogan: 'They say. What say they? Let them say!' That has always been his philosophy as an artist. Often 'they' have said harsh things of his art; of the man himself they have said nothing but good. It is conceivable, when all is known of him, that the sweet legend of Shaw's personality will outlive the record of his works.

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

### § II

I soon recovered from the failure of 'The Stag', for a few months later Charles B. Cochran asked me to write his 1930 Revue. Immediately I needed a new size in hats.

I walked on air from his office in Bond Street, hearing tunes in the hooting of the taxis, seeing sketches in the crowded buses, and conjuring up spectacles from the jewelled windows of Cartier and Boucheron.

Here, at last, seemed the chance I had been awaiting. Cochran was the centre of elegance and excitement in the theatre, with just that touch of toughness that brought in the crowds — and the money. In Cochran's show-case there was the most fascinating collection of creatures whom any impresario can ever have gathered together — Delysia *en paillettes* with Lifar dancing by her side, Diana Cooper, standing in frozen beauty with Grock cutting capers at her feet, the Guitrys on one side, Bergner on the other, Chaliapin singing against a trumpeting of elephants, backcloths by Derain, Picasso, Bérard, music by Bach, Walton, Berners. . . .

As A. P. Herbert wrote:

Reinhardt and Hackenschmidt were one to you;  
Carpentier, Bernhardt, Duse did your will;  
Helen of Troy and Jessie of Revue,  
Barrie and Pirandello filled a bill.

Nothing was done because it was 'the thing',  
Nothing was done in avarice or haste;  
Beauty was Queen, Efficiency was King  
And over all there ruled the god of Taste.

Anything one writes about Cochran revues in these days must have the quality of a period piece; the conditions which nurtured them have vanished for ever. They were international — today we are provincial; they were lavish — today we are austere; they catered for the white ties and tails (though with a shrewd eye on the upper circle) — today no such audience

## ON WITH THE DANCE

exists; even the occupants of the stalls arrive in their seats bearing the trophies of the fish queue. And though the people who stand in fish queues — myself included — are, as we all know, quite wonderful, though they are lovely and of good report, they are not, to the writer, a source of absolutely intoxicating inspiration. Indeed, it damps one even to think of them.

I waltzed back to the little house in Westminster, told Gaskin the good news, sat down at the piano, and there and then hammered out a number which still, from time to time, echoes dimly over the radio. It was called 'The Little Things You Do', and the words, without the tune, are just too silly to record. When the revue was produced, Cochran's genius gave this trifle a glint of magic. He had the chorus dance on one by one, in dresses that descended from sheer white to stark black — white silk, netted silk, ivory, beige, French grey, deeper grey, dark grey, near black. And then — on came a startling blonde in the blackest of black velvet.

It was a pretty little tune. It seems to hang round the room as I write. Let us talk of the melodies of those days.

### § III

They drift back to me like the echoes from a haunted ball-room; and of all of them the most nostalgic are those of Cole Porter. I had met Cole in Paris pretty near the beginning of his career. He was an elegant young man — dinner jackets by Kilgour and French, shirts by Sulka, dressing-gowns by Charvet — all worn with that curious negligence which makes Americans the worst best-dressed men in the world. He used to wander in and out of 25 Rue de Surène, one of the loveliest houses in Paris, where I often stayed. It was the official residence of the Baron Wedel Jarlsberg, the Norwegian Minister — a Louis Seize figure who dominated his country for thirty years. Had he been born a citizen of France or England he might well have dominated Europe — or so Venizelos once told me.

In the final couplet of one of Cole's first songs lies all the acid

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‘ang of the period. It comes at the end of ‘Babes in the Wood’, a song about the adventure of two little gold-diggers:

They have found that the fountain of youth  
Is a mixture of gin and vermouth.

He used to sing that song in the great drawing-room in the Rue de Surène, convulsing the Baron so much that he always laughed before the point. ‘Dat is too amusink!’ he would roar. ‘Dat is de fonniest tink I have heard!’

I only once saw Cole depressed. That was late one night at Le Bœuf sur le Toit, which in those days was a sweetly scandalous institution. He was sitting alone in a corner, staring glumly at the carpet. I asked him what was biting him.

‘I can’t think of a rhyme for duck-billed platypus,’ he growled. He wanted it for one of the various animals catalogued in ‘Let’s do it’.

The songs of those times seemed to have a quality which one does not find today — no doubt owing to one’s own rapidly approaching decline. Do you remember Vivian Ellis’s ‘Wind in the Willows’, with its delicate shadow-play of major and minor? And ‘Experiment’, as interpreted by Gertrude Lawrence, who sang so ravishingly out of tune that one prayed she would never, never hit the right note? And the macabre ‘Miss Otis Regrets’, which was really the first appearance of surrealism in popular music? And, of course, Noel Coward’s ‘Dance, dance, dance little lady’, which sent a sharp and glittering nail into the chromium-plated coffin of the Bright Young Things? Noel is so prodigal a genius that he will forgive me for pointing out, as a matter of technical interest, that others, besides himself, must take some of the credit for the success of this remarkable song. One is Liza Lehmann, from whose setting of ‘Ah, moon of my delight!’ the melody is quite unconsciously taken. (Every composer, however original, is in danger of committing these inadvertent plagiarisms.) Another is Cochran, who visualized it in a setting of madness and despair; and the third is Oliver Messel, who created the white, staring masks for the chorus.

But, as usual, we are being swirled away from the story.

## ON WITH THE DANCE

How did the revue eventually take shape? How did one write what, and why?

What peculiar collection of talents enabled one to scribble lines and lyrics and scraps of melody which were to give a year's employment to hundreds of workers, to extract £100,000 from the British public, and to net a very pleasant little sum for oneself?

### § I V

The answer, of course, was Cochran. In every revue the producer is far the most vital element — compared with him, the authors, composers, designers, stars, are of secondary importance. But Cochran was more than a producer. He inspired one. Let us watch him at work.

'Before we do anything else,' said Cochran, 'we must decide on our first act finale. You can go wrong in any other part of a revue and recover from it, but if your first act finale doesn't hit them in the eye, you're sunk. So please let's have your ideas for the period, the place and what happens in it.'

This ultimatum plunged me into gloom. It seemed that every period and every place had been done to death. One sickened at the thought of another crinoline or another bustle, one dared not even mention Paris or Vienna. Finally, in desperation, I rang up Cochran and said: 'I feel there's only one place you haven't used, and that's heaven.'

He chuckled over the telephone. 'An excellent idea. We'll send them all to heaven.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. Get to work on it.'

I got to work. I saw the scene entirely in terms of white — white dresses, white wigs, white flowers, white clouds. Into this *milieu* I introduced various historical characters, who would give the effect of moving statues, and would speak their lines against a song sung from the wings. This dialogue drove me nearly mad. The would-be writer of revues might well spend a few sad but enlightening hours trying to produce — for Queen

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Elizabeth,' Lord Nelson and such folk — lines which are terse, in character and so screamingly funny that the entire audience collapses in the stalls at the fall of the curtain.

The scene, as it was interpreted by Oliver Messel, was triumphantly beautiful, and even *The Times*, which was not in those days given to superlatives, observed that it was the loveliest spectacle that even Cochran had ever given to the world.

### § v

Little by little the revue took shape. I did not feel competent, at that time, to write the full musical score — (some years later, in 'Floodlight', I had the great fun of doing this) — and Cochran suggested Vivian Ellis as a musical collaborator. No partnership could have been happier, and it was an honour to work with so sensitive and so unselfish a musician. If Vivian had been American, German, or Czech, instead of firmly British, his melodic genius would certainly have caused him to be hailed as the rightful successor to Puccini. It would take far too long to describe the gradual transformation of my various scraps of paper into the living, sparkling, entertainment which Cochran eventually made of them. I am tempted to dwell on various scenes because of the stories attached to them — notably a sketch I wrote called 'Madame Tussaud's in the year 1960'. It showed a number of living celebrities, posed as waxworks, with a little group of tourists inspecting them. It ended with one of the tourists approaching a figure made up as Bernard Shaw, who is standing, very still, among the waxworks. 'How long has *he* been dead?' asks one of the tourists. On which the figure moves, and exclaims: 'Dead? Not bloody likely!' Blackout. Shaw came up to me on the first night and said: 'That was the best thing in your revue — but then, of course, that line is absolutely fool-proof, always and everywhere. Its immortality is certain.'

More amusing, to me, than any episode connected with celebrities, were the antics of some of my acquaintances at that



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period. The news that I was writing a Cochran revue resulted in an immediate and marked increase in my post-bag. Nearly everybody I had ever met, it seemed, had a niece or a cousin of ravishing beauty who sang or danced like an angel and who might be persuaded to appear in the revue. 'Of course,' they would write, 'she wouldn't want to go in the *chorus*, or anything like that — all she would want would be just to come on for ten minutes, all by herself — and I *know* she would not ask a very enormous salary. I *do* think Mr. Cochran should do something about her as she is sure to be *snapped up*. P.S. If she *is* engaged, do you think Mr. Cochran could put her on in the *first* part, as her mother — a great friend of mine, and such a dear — we were at school together — her mother is rather *against* her doing it at all.'

People really used to write that sort of letter.

Worse, they tackled one in the flesh. They all had wonderful ideas for the revue — and by a strange coincidence, all these ideas could have been put into immediate execution by the expenditure of £10,000, the rebuilding of the theatre, and the re-writing of the entire show. Women would come up to me and say:

'My dear, I have a most *delicious* idea for your revue. Of course, it's only quite *vague*, but I know it would be heaven, and it would be bound to make a *sensation*. You see, my dear, it's all about a *fan*. A quite enormous *FAN* . . . and, you'll never guess, the fan is made entirely of Mr. Cochran's Young Ladies! I thought somebody could *build* something . . . you know, one of those things that revolve . . . and they could all climb on it, with *practically* nothing on, and then the fan would be fluttered by an immense *HAND* that would come out of the wings. And while *that* was going on, out would come Delysia . . . what? She isn't in your revue? Oh dear, *what* a mistake, you must get her at once . . . never mind . . . out would come *somebody*, and sing a song all about the *FAN* and all the lovely people who had used it . . . and then I thought there could be a *PROCESSION*, and all the young ladies could jump off the fan and do a dance, and everybody would go *MAD* !'

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Only once was I unhappy as the revue was shaping. This was during that gruesome ceremony which is known as the Audition. For the benefit of the layman it may be explained that an Audition is a try-out for would-be chorus girls. Word goes round that at such-and-such a theatre at such-and-such a time, Mr. Cochran will grant a hearing to any young females who are wishful to be employed in his revue. It sounds as if it might be fun; in fact, it is hell . . . or so it seemed to me.

As we pushed through the swing-doors, into the darkened stalls, and saw for the first time the crowd of girls who had gathered on the stage, my heart sank. We only needed twelve, but the stage was packed to capacity; it was obvious that only a very small percentage of the girls had any hope of being employed. At once I was tortured by visions of widowed mothers, husbands dying of cancer and lechers panting on the staircase. As the reader may observe, I was half kidding, half sincere. But when the audition began, I ceased kidding. For there were women who ought to have been at home in bed, wrapped up, with somebody kind to look after them. Women past middle age, with scanty gilded hair and haunted eyes and mouths that twitched into a ghastly parody of a smile. Women who could not sing, nor dance, nor act — and yet insisted on trying to do all three at once.

Cochran, I must say, was perfect with these tragic females. He was a busy man, they were wasting his time, he would have been within his rights if he had dismissed them with a brusque wave of the hand. He did no such thing. He heard them to the end of their croaking songs or their creaking dances and then, with exquisite courtesy, thanked them, and wafted them away. They knew, of course, that it was hopeless, although they had been asked to 'leave their address'. But he had given them a moment's glow. And as they clambered on to their buses, to go home, they could say to themselves: 'Well, I did my stuff today for a great showman. And he liked it. He said he did. Yes . . . he said he did.'

## ON WITH THE DANCE

### § V I

At last the day came when the whole company was transported to Manchester where, after another ten days' rehearsal, we were due to open for a three weeks' season — 'prior to London production'.

And now the trouble really began. If the reader is bored by theatrical technicalities he had better skip the next few paragraphs, but if he thinks that most 'shop' is interesting, he may care to read on.

The 'trouble' which we now encountered was the eternal bugbear of all revue — 'running order'. This, as its name implies, is the order in which the various 'numbers' are placed on the programme. The layman can best appreciate its importance if he thinks of a revue in terms of a banquet. A perfect meal depends not only on the quality of the individual dishes and wines, but on the sequence of their presentation; even a Lord Mayor's feast would be repulsive if it began with ice cream and port and ended in turtle soup.

It is the same in revue. We had all the songs, sketches and dances that we needed, indeed, a good many more; all we had to do, apparently, was to put them in their right order and then to go ahead. Alas, it was not so simple as that, not by a long way. Perhaps the best indication of the complexity of this problem can be given by an imaginary conference between the leading lady, the producer and the author, a few days before the first performance. (Not so very imaginary, either!)

LEADING LADY (*with suspicious brightness*) I suppose you realize that with the running order as it is at the moment I don't appear *at all* in the second half of the revue?

PRODUCER Really, my dear . . .

LEADING LADY (*ignoring him*) But then, as you've put me on *all* the time in the first half, perhaps it's just as well. I shall be quite exhausted.

AUTHOR But darling . . .

LEADING LADY (*ignoring him, too*) Mind you, I'm not complaining. Oh no. I never *complain*. (*A bright laugh, to point the*

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*folly of such a supposition*) It's just that the audience might think it a little *strange*, when the second half comes. They might say, 'I wonder what's happened to her. I wonder if she's dead.' That's all. Not that it matters.

PRODUCER You've got your powder-puff number in the second half. . . .

AUTHOR And you're in the boarding-house sketch.

LEADING LADY (*sharply*) As a *maid*!

AUTHOR It's the most important part.

PRODUCER And you sing the last reprise in the Finale.

LEADING LADY (*ironically*) I *shall* be busy, shan't I? Singing a reprise from the wings at the same time that the Trixie Twins do their number on the staircase with the castanets. *That's* an impossible idea, in any case. Nobody can sing a reprise with all *that* going on. I never *heard* such a noise from a pair of castanets. I think they must put something in them.

PRODUCER Well, what do you suggest?

LEADING LADY There's only one thing. You must transpose the whole Helen of Troy sequence to the second half and put it immediately after the Cocktail ballet.

PRODUCER That's crazy. Nearly the whole company's in both of them and nobody would have time to change. They need at least six minutes.

LEADING LADY Then Mr. Nichols must write a nice little sketch that'll last six minutes and can be done as a front-cloth.

AUTHOR Who's going to act in it? Everybody will be changing.

PRODUCER Besides, both sets would have to be rebuilt. It takes three men ten minutes to put the Wooden Horse together, and it takes nearly three minutes to get all the girls into it.

Etc. etc.

It said a good deal for Cochran's tact that such difficulties, little by little, were miraculously adjusted. Our stars were no more tiresome than usual, but it is in the nature of most stars — particularly in revue — to think firstly of themselves and only secondly of the show. It is also in the nature of stars to be

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blindly and totally unaware of the sort of material that suits them. They have to be dragged, weeping and protesting, to their greatest triumphs.

The day of the final dress rehearsal dawned. We were opening at eight o'clock on the Saturday night. Early on Friday morning the company assembled, and played all through the day and the night into the small hours of Saturday morning. Drooping and exhausted they reassembled on the Saturday morning. Their voices were hoarse, their feet were sore, but still they kept at it. I sat hunched up in the stalls, chain-smoking, with a splitting headache. From time to time I wandered about back-stage, talking to the stage-hands, who were so tired that they could hardly keep their eyes open.

'Those chaps are the most extraordinary of the lot,' I said to Cochran.

'The stage-hands?' He nodded. 'Yes. They're stage-struck, of course. No men could possibly stick it if they weren't.'

Seven o'clock struck. The company drifted to their dressing-rooms, to snatch a few minutes' rest and a cup of coffee before the show. A small army of charwomen invaded the auditorium with dustpans and brushes and began feverishly to sweep the carpets and bang the seats back into position. Programme girls appeared and stationed themselves at the entrance. In ten minutes the doors would open and the great house would begin to fill, from floor to ceiling, with a black cloud of muttering, potentially hostile humanity. If I had not been so tired I should have been very frightened indeed, for — as the programmes announced — this was my show, and on my shoulders the responsibility for its success or its failure must be laid.

As it was, I staggered up to my seat at the back of the dress circle and fell fast asleep. How long I slept I do not remember, but I know what woke me up. It was a loud, long roar. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The revue had begun. And — thank God — they were laughing. It was all right. We were a success.

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### § VII

On the following morning I lay huddled in bed, feeling as though the end of the world had come.

Outside, the sky was dark as night, and the sleety rain hissed against the window-panes; but the elements were not as dark nor as hissing as the notices.

They were an all-time 'low'. Never, proclaimed the Manchester critics, had any entertainment so futile, so tasteless, so utterly lacking in any sort of charm, been presented to Manchester's outraged citizens. It was quite impossible to understand how Mr. Cochran had entrusted the creation of his annual revue to so incompetent, so tedious, witless and generally hateful a person as Mr. Beverley Nichols.

Well, this was the end. This was an imperative cue to go out into the garden and eat a very large number of worms. For my own feelings of humiliation were enhanced by a shattering sense of responsibility to others — to all the people whom I had let down, to Cochran and to his backers, to the artists, the designers, the musicians, the dressers, the stage-hands. How could one ever look any of them in the face again? What sort of greeting would one get from old Charlie, the stage doorkeeper, and Joe and Bert and Alf, and all the others who had sweated till the small hours of the morning, night after night, manipulating the props and the backcloths and the lights which were the setting for one's apparently worthless ideas? How would the conductor feel tonight, raising his baton before a half-empty house, knowing how hopeless it was to attempt to infuse any sparkle into those 'threadbare' tunes? As for the stars, it needed no great exercise of the imagination to forecast how *they* would feel, for all the critics had described them as thwarted geniuses, potential Duses, Sophie Tuckers and Bob Hopes, whose talents had been persistently frustrated by the abounding ineptitude of the author. These unhappy creatures — it was averred — had been given absolutely no 'material'. (That word 'material' will certainly be found written on the heart of every man who has ever attempted to write a revue.)

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At that moment there was a knock on the door, and in came Cochran himself, as bright as a button, clad in a dressing-gown of crimson silk.

'Good morning.' He glanced at the piles of newspapers scattered over the bed. 'Been reading the notices?'

'Cocky,' I began feebly, 'I can't begin to say how sorry . . .'

'That's all right,' he interrupted. 'I just wanted to show you this note I'm sending to the press, and see if you approve it.'

He handed me a sheet of paper on which was typed the following announcement:

Mr. Charles B. Cochran is so delighted with the work which Mr. Beverley Nichols has done for his 1930 Revue that he has today commissioned Mr. Nichols to write his 1931 Revue.

There was, of course, nothing to say. It was one of those superb gestures which take away the breath — leaving one dazed and bewildered and sure of nothing except one's loyalty to the man who made it. As it happened, Cochran's gesture — though he had made it in the purest spirit of generosity — was not so insanely quixotic as it appeared on that bleak morning. He knew that he had a good show; he guessed, too, that some of the malice behind the notices might be personal, directed by journalists against another journalist — a journalist who had had the effrontery to break out of the rut, and not only to write words but *music*, as though he were another Noel Coward!

At any rate, by the end of the week I was able to sit back in my study and write the following note.:

Have come home in a state of exhaustion, battered, gibbering, but on the whole triumphant. The main, shining, beautiful fact is that the libraries have taken £36,000 worth of seats, which is an all-time Cochran record, and therefore, presumably, an all-time record for revue, at any rate in England.

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IT was lucky, indeed, that the Cochran revue was a success. For while I had been living in the strange no-man's-land of the theatre, where it is neither night nor day, and where time is measured by the rhythmic beat of the chorus, the world outside had been in a state of great commotion.

Wall Street had crashed; and in that crash I had lost the greater part of the proceeds of ten years' intensive work.

Once again, this should have depressed me, but it did not. My passage down the slippery slope towards bankruptcy was accomplished — or so it now seems — in an atmosphere of sustained hilarity. On the day before Wall Street broke I lunched with the P. G. Wodehouses, and though luncheon with the P. G. Wodehouses is a charming beginning to the day, it is an unsuitable preparation for sound financial investment. Mrs. Wodehouse was a grand gambler, but she treated Wall Street as though it were a perfumed annexe to Le Touquet, and she usually chose a share because it had a pretty name. Sometimes, however, she was guided by sounder principles; I once heard her say: 'Everybody's looking so terribly tired this season, I think I shall buy a packet of Simmons' Beds Ordinary.' Which she did, with considerable advantage.

At luncheon, P. G. — whose nickname is 'Plum' — had discovered a copy of the *Financial Times*, and this sober journal proved, in his hands, to be rich in unexpected comedy. He was especially delighted in reports from the Paris Bourse; when he read that, 'Turks were sagging' it made him think of quantities of weary gentlemen in fezzes; the news that, 'Argentines were buoyant' called to mind a picture of energetic gigolos. The phrase that brought the loudest laughter was, 'There has been a liquidation of weak bears'. His comment on this was as funny as the immortal remark he had once made to me in the Monkey House at the Zoo. We had been gazing, with a sort of horrified



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fascination, at one of those baboons whose behinds are painted all the hues of the rainbow, as though to prove that even in the mind of the Creator there must be Rabelaisian interludes. Slowly, shamelessly, the creature backed towards us, exposing to us the full glare of its fabulous posterior. Plum blinked, and then observed, with a sigh: 'That monkey's wearing its club colours in the wrong place.'

After luncheon, warmed by a glass of Cointreau, and fortified by a cigar of Churchillian proportions, I wandered down Bond Street to look at the shop windows which, in those days, were as rich and brilliant as a string of multi-coloured jewels. There was nothing to do until cocktail time. I remembered that Mrs. Wodehouse had said something about an American security called Electric Bond and Share. She was not quite sure what it was, except that it was probably something to do with electricity which, as we all agreed, was 'a good thing'.

So I decided to stroll along to a certain firm of international brokers in the neighbourhood where I already had a small account, and purchase some of this delectable investment. Since there was nearly a fortnight before settling day I should be able — so I fondly imagined — to buy the shares, sell them at a profit, and conclude the whole transaction without even mentioning it to my bank manager.

When I reached the office things seemed to be very quiet. There was none of the hurly-burly of the market-place; it was all tranquil, luxurious and — in a curious way — seductive. I sat and studied the big wall chart on which the rise or fall of the principal securities was recorded from hour to hour. At first I could not discover Electric Bond and Share, but on looking more closely I found it listed under the 'Curb Market'. I had not the faintest idea what the 'Curb Market' was, and I had a moment's uneasiness; it did not sound entirely respectable; it suggested a lot of people shuffling about on the sidewalk waving bits of worthless paper over their heads. (In the grim light of experience this picture seems not so very far from the truth.) I dismissed these craven thoughts. If Electric Bond and Share was good enough for Ethel Wodehouse it was good enough for

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me. (It is only fair to add that never for one moment had she tried to persuade me to buy the wretched thing. It was entirely my own idea.)

There was a nice-looking young man hovering about in black striped trousers; he had a kind expression and a diamond tie-pin shaped like a horseshoe upside down — a sinister symbol. I went up to him and asked if he could buy me some Electric Bond and Share. Yes, he said, he would be charmed. Would they, I asked him, go up, did he think? Oh yes, he expected they would go up; in fact, they were sure to go up. Practically everything did go up nowadays, didn't it? Yes, I said, I supposed it did, and would he buy me five hundred?

As soon as I had said five hundred I gasped, because I realized that I had made a complete miscalculation. The shares were standing at about 100 dollars, and I had vaguely worked out that 500 times 100 dollars was £2000, which was all that I desired to risk in speculation — indeed, a good deal more. But now, it dawned on me that the sterling equivalent of 50,000 dollars was actually £10,000. Which was far more than I possessed in the whole world.

What was to be done? Obviously, anybody with a grain of sense would have said: 'I'm sorry; I made a mistake; make it a hundred instead of five hundred.' But I was not anybody with a grain of sense. I had a ludicrous feeling of pride; I did not want to confess to this young man that I could not afford £10,000.

So the transaction was concluded, papers were signed, cigarettes exchanged, and out of the office I walked, feeling a little dizzy, but on the whole well satisfied that I had done a sensible thing.

### § 11

Here let us pause for a moment's reflection. It is conceivable that this book may be read by young men who are making their way in the world, and it is possible that they may profit by my experience.

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The action which I have just described was, by every possible business standard, insane. I had staked a good deal more than the earnings of a lifetime on a security of which I knew nothing whatsoever.

If I had been asked to spend two hundred pounds on a picture, I should have thought long and carefully, have called in expert advice, and supplemented this advice by my own study of the appropriate critics. Yet two hundred pounds was only two per cent of the sum of which I had so airily disposed.

What was the explanation of this mystery? I was not a child; I was not uneducated; I had travelled the world, pitted my wits against the best of my contemporaries, and reached the top of a highly competitive profession. Why then this sudden assumption of the role of a half-witted adolescent?

The explanation, I think, lies in the fact that never once in my life, neither at home, nor at school, nor at Oxford, had anybody of authority ever talked to me, even for five minutes, about money. They had talked, at great length, about the Elizabethan ecclesiastical settlement; they had waxed very eloquent about the importance of Erasmus in the spiritual liberation of mankind; and some of them — particularly when I was in the pink flush of youth — had worked themselves into quite a frenzy about Sex . . . on which large subject, I must confess, I could have given them quite a number of household hints.

But nobody had mentioned money; nobody had said: 'One day you will have your first thousand pounds, and this is what you must do about it.'

Of all the defects of our educational system, this seems to me the most grotesque, particularly in a capitalist society. If there were classes of simple, practical money-management in every school, an untold amount of misery might be avoided. There would be no more old clergymen and retired civil servants facing the bankruptcy courts because they had sunk their little capital in some worthless hole in the ground. There would be no more small tradesmen queueing up for the workhouse because they had hidden their life savings under the mattress.

This situation would be farcical if it were not tragic; maybe it

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is both. For our country abounds in intelligent young men, of left-wing tendencies, who consider themselves experts on 'economics', although they have so meagre a personal experience of handling money that they would probably make a mess of buying a savings certificate. Schoolmasters, particularly in the poorer districts, are most culpable in this respect. At a later — and wiser — period in my life I was often in the East End of London; and from time to time I would attend some of the night classes where, to audiences of eager youth, teachers were engaged in the congenial task of attacking the evils of the capitalist system, the horrors of the Stock Exchange, the follies of the Bank of England and the general depravity of anybody with more than £500 a year. Not one of these men could have given a reasoned criticism of the simplest company report. And from my experience in the gentle art of heckling I soon discovered that they were ignorant of the meaning of the most elementary terms of the very language of money. They could not tell you what a 'debenture' was, nor the difference between a share that was 'fully paid' and one that was not.

However, this hobby-horse is running away with me. Let us therefore terminate this interlude by giving to our intelligent young man, who is faced with the problem of investing his first thousand pounds, four words of advice. Just four words:

*See Your Bank Manager*

Having seen him, keep most strictly to his counsel; bank-managers are charming people, rich in the world's wisdom. In their private offices are acted a hundred dramas, varying from Coward comedies to Strindberg tragedies. There is nothing they do not know about human nature. And, oddly enough, they are rarely cynics.

Now we can resume our story.

## SOLD OUT

### § III

On the following morning I opened the newspaper, to stagger back from a headline three inches deep:

#### WALL STREET CRASHES

##### STOCKS STUMBLE IN FRENZIED SELLING

A glance at Electric Bond and Share informed me that it had fallen twenty points. I had lost ten thousand dollars — a matter of £2000 — which was about a third of my worldly wealth.

All the physical symptoms so painfully familiar to unsuccessful gamblers assailed me — sickness in the stomach, a peculiar feeling of paralysis in the back of the knees, and a marked tendency to gulp. It could not be true. There must be some mistake. I read hastily through the report to see if there was any ray of hope; there seemed to be none at all. The market had closed at its weakest; and on account of the avalanche of selling the tape was nearly an hour behind its time.

I had a moment of sheer panic, in which ghostly bailiffs knocked at the door, and the furniture seemed to stand on tip-toe, waiting to fly out of the window.

And then, so great is the resilience of youth, that I threw the paper on the floor, said, 'That's that,' and dismissed the matter from my mind. It needed no very superhuman effort to do this because the whole thing seemed strangely unreal. If I had burned two thousand pound notes in the fire, and watched them crinkle into ashes, it might have been less easy to laugh about it. But my losses were only 'on paper', they were a sort of academic abstraction. It would all come right in the end.

Besides, as the reader will remember, during all this period I was not really 'there'; I was living in another world — the world of revue. On that very morning I was going to Paris with Cochran, on a lightning tour of the French theatres, spying out talent. The stage was the only reality; all the rest was illusion.

The journey was most agreeable, the Channel was calm, and Cochran was an enchanting companion. Between Calais and

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Paris he entertained me with the story of the rise from obscurity of one of his most famous stars. And since it has the bite and pace of a tale by Maugham, I will tell it here, as a momentary respite from my financial troubles.

Miss A — as we will call her — was very anxious to find a protector. (In those apocryphal days, a protector was called a 'sugar-daddy'.) Miss A had everything that a protector could demand — an exquisite figure, immense brown eyes, a yielding disposition and — which is much the most important item — an almost inexhaustible capacity for *listening*. This, as all such ladies will agree, is really the most profitable of all the feminine arts. Gentlemen — particularly old gentlemen — do not need ladies who will lie back and love; they need ladies who will lie back and *listen*. It is the old hunger for an audience, which is of all hungers the most primeval.

But where was Miss A to find her protector? Although she had a small but showy part in the current Cochran revue, no such person had yet presented himself — maybe for that very reason, for the chastity of Mr. Cochran's young ladies was almost as notorious as their beauty.

Then, one day, she heard of — we will call him Mr. B. Mr. B was a famous figure in London. He had made a vast fortune and he entertained lavishly. But he was lonely. None of Mr. B's young ladies, it seemed, had developed the art of listening to the required pitch. At some time or other, usually in the small hours of the morning, they would pipe up a feeble note for themselves. This was too much for Mr. B, who would then dismiss them sadly — loaded, it is true, with diamonds, but without the more solid satisfaction of a 'settlement'.

Now Mr. B always spent his week-ends gambling at Le Touquet, which in those days was a charming little toy town that spangled the coast of Normandy. (Today it is a gaunt and tattered ruin, like a blitzed doll's house.) So Miss A decided to risk all, and follow him. She had one evening dress, a return ticket and a thousand francs. It was not very much. But Miss A, in addition to these assets, had a Plan. This was how she worked it.

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Arrived at the hotel, she changed into her evening dress and walked across to the Casino. It was early, and the gambling rooms were almost deserted. At the desk she bought one plaque, just one, for a thousand francs. She then walked over to the highest table, on which there was a notice stating that the 'minimum de départ' was a thousand francs, implying, of course, that Miss A's tiny, solitary plaque was the lowest amount she could possibly stake. There was nobody sitting at the table as yet, but she knew that in a couple of hours' time, in a certain seat which was always reserved for him, Mr. B would be reclining, with piles of ten-thousand franc plaques before him. So she gently laid her little plaque on the table, opposite the seat on his right, thereby reserving her place. She then called for an attendant.

'I shall be sitting here after dinner,' she said. 'In the meantime I wish to see the *maître d'hôtel*.'

The attendant shrugged his shoulders. 'He is in the restaurant, mam'selle.'

Miss A's eyes flashed. 'I wish to see him here. In this room. At once!' And she drew herself up as they had taught her to draw herself up in the shabby school of dramatic art in Warsaw where she had first learned the tricks of the trade. It was a good gesture, well-timed and a moment later the *maître d'hôtel* was standing by her side.

'You do not know me, monsieur,' she said.

He bowed. It was regrettable, but true.

'It is my first visit; I arrived only an hour ago; and so — of course — I have not spent any money . . . yet.' A significant pause before the 'yet'.

'In spite of this,' she continued, 'at a certain time in the evening I shall ask you to bring me my bills. Yes, my bills. You will make them out for approximately a million francs. I will pay them at once. There will be a *pourboire* for you of ten per cent.'

Needless to say, it was not put quite so tersely as that; there were hints, hesitation, persuasions. But all was finally arranged to Miss A's satisfaction.

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The clock switches forward to midnight. Picture the scene at the high table, which is now the centre of a glittering crowd of cosmopolitans. Mr. B, flushed and slightly intoxicated, is winning heavily. Opposite him sit three members of the Greek syndicate, glaring at him like plucked vultures. All round the table there is a rich assortment of powdered bosoms, presumably heaving and certainly jewelled.

But where is Miss A? Her seat is empty, guarded by its pitiable little plaque. Ah! Here she comes at last. She looks very beautiful, though somewhat *distracte*. Mr. B rises, bows. He is obviously *épris*. She returns the bow, but distantly, and sits down. All eyes are upon her.

At precisely this moment, the 'shoe', as she had calculated, comes in front of her. Very slowly, for she has delicious hands, Miss A deals Mr. B two cards. She glances at him, to see if he needs another card. He shakes his head. She turns up her cards. A two and a three. Will she draw again? Yes. And this time she turns up a six.

She has lost. With a superb 'take away this bauble' gesture, she pushes the 'shoe' to Mr. B, and flicks her solitary plaque away from her as though it were a dog-eared nickel.

The table is enthralled. What will she do? Has she any more money? Who *is* she?

Above all, what will Mr. B do?

The table is not long left in doubt. With a brusque gesture, he pushes over to her a pile of ten-thousand franc plaques.

'Permettez-moi, mam'selle,' he says. 'It will bring me luck.'

Miss A regards the pile of plaques as though they smell very disagreeable indeed, and then stares at the ceiling with an extremely Polish expression.

Mr. B, obviously, cannot let matters rest there. Among the watching bosoms he has many friends. He is known as a man who always gets what he wants, in public and in private.

'But mam'selle — I insist!'

The bosoms are rigid with excitement; over the whole table there is a feeling of acute suspense; even the croupier seems frozen into immobility, and holds his hand suspended at the



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wheel, lest he should shatter the silence with the tinkling of the little silver ball.

Through that silence comes the voice of Miss A, pitched sweet and clear, just as they had taught her in the dramatic class at Warsaw, when they always warned her to aim at the man in the back row of the gallery.

‘I do not gamble again, monsieur, until I have paid my bills.’

Back comes the voice of Mr. B saying — as destiny had planned — ‘I should be enchanted to pay them.’

To which Miss A, in accents which reflected the highest credit on her elocution master, retorts:

*‘There is no man in this Casino, monsieur, who is rich enough to pay my bills.’*

There was genius in that short sentence; it was a dart hurled straight and true at the centre of an old man’s vanity.

At that moment, precisely, dramatically, the black-coated figure of the *maitre d’hôtel* bent low beside her, bearing a silver tray which was loaded with Miss A’s fictitious bills.

At that moment, also, the shareholders in Mr. B’s business, if they had been psychic, would have sold their holdings at any price they could get. For Mr. B paid those bills on the silver tray. And for the rest of his life — so ardently did Miss A practise her supreme art of listening — he continued to pay, through the nose, and through every other available organ, till in the end there was nothing left for anyone.

It is a human little story. And everybody comes out of it very well. For when Mr. B went bankrupt, and when there was not much point in listening to him any longer, Miss A decided that she really ought to do something to show her gratitude for favours past. And so — for a large sum, and to a new admirer — she sold one of the first presents he had ever given her — a Canaletto, which she had always suspected, and rightly, of being bogus.

She sent him the cheque, and with the cheque, a charming little note, fragrant with nostalgia and Chanel Number 5. It ended with the words: ‘The trouble about you, my dear, is that you talk too much.’

## § IV

With such stories did Cochran entertain me till we arrived at the Gare du Nord. All thoughts of financial disaster were banished.

But as I dressed for dinner I remembered that I was, potentially if not in fact, a bankrupt. It did not seem to matter very much. (Nothing ever matters very much in Paris — except, of course, love, and wine, and beauty, and the purity of design and the integrity of thought and the perfection of poise and all those things which in Britain are forbidden by law.) However, though the Nichols fortune, or lack of it, was of minor importance, it would be interesting to know what was happening to the market. I remembered that my broker's Paris office was in the Place Vendôme, almost next door to the Ritz, where I was meeting Cochran for a cocktail at seven. I decided to look in there before dinner to see how Wall Street had opened. Obviously, I told myself, there would have been a sharp rally; the idea of a prolonged slump in America, with all its wealth, was unthinkable.

Nevertheless, as the taxi twisted through the sparkling streets, I had to confess to a slight feeling of apprehension. Supposing . . . but it was no use supposing. I tapped on the window of the taxi and told the driver to go to the Ritz first. There I drank a couple of side-cars — the best cocktail in the world, consisting of equal portions of brandy, Cointreau and lemon juice. If everybody drank side-cars there would be no wars and we should all live to be centenarians.

It was lucky that I had those drinks. For the scene in the broker's office was frightening. It was packed with waxworks — American men and women shocked into immobility, stunned, white-faced, sitting on the benches staring at the board, on which was being written the swiftly-moving story of the greatest financial debacle of all time.

I stared with them, and I too was stunned. Electric Bond and Share had gone down another twenty points, and even as I watched the board an attendant moved across and revised the

## SOLD OUT

figure to five points lower still. Ten years of work and effort were being torn from me and tossed carelessly in the gutter . . . for what? For a careless word, for a ridiculous gesture, for a moment of vulgar pride. In short, for sheer, bloody stupidity.

What was to be done? Sell, before they dropped still further? Take my courage in both hands and buy on the hope of a rise? But what should I buy *with*? The money simply wasn't there. Besides . . . supposing they were really worth nothing at all? I spun round in the whirlpool of vacillation with which all unsuccessful plungers are so painfully familiar. In the end I did nothing at all.

Cochran must have found me poor company that night, but not so poor as I found myself. The night was haunted by horrible dreams, and on the following day I made no sense at all. I could only wait until the markets opened and hope for the best.

At last, the hour of the New York opening arrived. Once more I climbed the staircase in the Place Vendôme. Once more I pushed open the door, and mingled with the crowd of waxworks. And now, thank God, the story of the investment board had taken a happier turning; there had been a rally; Electric Bond and Share had risen fifteen points.

I did a lightning calculation. If I sold now I should lose over £5000. I gulped. I thought of all the trees I could buy for £5000. All the shrubs and bulbs and lovely flowering things that could have come into my life.

And then I saw the attendant moving once more to the board. What figure was he going to mark this — up or down? I did not even dare to look. I turned, pulled my passport and my credentials from my pocket, and gave orders to sell. When I had done so, I looked back at the board again. They had gone up another two points. Even so, I had still lost close on £5000.

I walked down those stairs very slowly. 'Five thousand pounds,' I kept saying to myself. 'With tax that means nearly seven thousand pounds. And that, in its turn, means God alone knows how many weary weeks and months and years of work, how many million words, perjuring my immortal soul.'

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The shop windows in the Rue de la Paix seemed to mock me. For five thousand pounds I could have filled my pockets with gold cigarette cases. I could have bought a diamond necklace — a couple of Rolls Royces — a villa on the Riviera. Oh — to hell with it! At any rate I had enough to buy another side-car — which I proceeded to do. As I drank it, it seemed to have a very special tang. For the money with which I paid for it was at least my own. It was no longer fairy gold, tumbling over the cliffs of the New York avalanche.

I had learned my lesson. And a few weeks later, when I listened to the bells of New Year's Eve, they seemed to be ringing, not only the end of a decade, but the fall of the curtain on the first act of my life.

## BOOK TWO



## THE WORLD FORGETTING

IN many ancient cities of our country it is still possible, merely by pushing open a door in a high brick wall, to pass from the bustle of the traffic into the hush of a garden. Few moments in life are more pleasurable than these, as one walks across a soft lawn, with the sounds of civilization drifting further away with every step, till they are lost in a distant hum of unreality. Never was bird-song from the lofty shadows more liquid, nor the scent of roses sweeter. One sighs: 'Why — oh why, must I ever go outside again?'

As I look back to 1930 I have just this sense of stepping out of a dusty highroad into the peace of a garden. Behind me were ten years of bounce and bustle, ten years of racketing round the world, pencil in hand, recording, always recording, leaving behind, as though in a paper-chase, an endless trail of sketches and impressions — most of which had long ago fluttered into oblivion. One had done enough of that. It was *vieux jeu*. Time to sit down and think.

And at last I had a place where I *could* sit down and think. I had a garden.

Later on the reader may perhaps be amused to hear a few stories about my book *Down the Garden Path*. Although it is a light-hearted trifle it seems to have stuck to me like a sort of label, just as *The Good Companions* has stuck to J. B. Priestley. We have both written better things — at least we both think so — but the label refuses to come off. Whenever I have to make an after-dinner speech, it is a foregone conclusion that the gentleman who introduces me will observe — with great archness — that I am about to lead the audience *up* the garden path. At which, with equal archness, I assume a startled smile which, by now, is growing a little thin.

Needless to say, *Down the Garden Path* was not written until I knew at least the elements of gardening. (Sometimes I wonder

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if it was ever *written* at all; it was more like arranging a bunch of mixed flowers; here a story, here a winding paragraph, here a purple passage — and suddenly, there was a book.) However, all that lay ahead. For the first time I found myself living for the sake of living, without any thought of ‘copy’.

No cottage in England could have been more ideally contrived as an introduction to country life. When G. B. Stern first stepped through the French windows into the garden, which at that moment was a sea of forget-me-nots, she looked around her and said: ‘This is what one thinks of when one shuts one’s eyes and says the word “Cottage”.’ Some people wishing to be smart, found it ‘blatantly picturesque’. Maybe it was, but there was nothing bogus or arty about it. Its date was about 1520 and the passage of four centuries had played the craziest tricks with its walls and its ceilings. It could no more help being picturesque than an old lady with a wrinkled face and silver hair.

It lay on the outskirts of a tiny village called Glatton in the county of Huntingdonshire, about a mile from the Great North Road and some seventy-five miles from London. In those days there was no thirty-mile limit, and one could do the journey in about an hour and a half. I used to race up the long straight roads as feverishly as any lover speeding to his mistress. If I were travelling at night I always carried in my pocket a powerful electric torch so that I could leap from the car without an instant’s delay, and run out into the garden, hurrying from bed to bed, even in the depths of winter, peering at the frozen earth to see if there was any sign of the first spikes of the snowdrops, groping my way down to the pond in the hope of finding the first trace of pink in the winter heather.

I threw myself into the task of making a garden with unbridled energy. There was a charming framework of tall clipped hedges, an ancient orchard, and a seven-acre field, but for many years nobody had done any work about the place. I tried to repair in a few months the neglect of a decade.

Looking back on those first essays what strikes me most is my astonishing credulity. I believed everybody and everything. When I read, on the outside of a seed-packet, that the contents





'DOWN THE GARDEN PATH'



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would infallibly transform themselves into 'gigantic spikes of blossom' within the space of a few weeks, I believed it. And when, months later, all that had transpired was a few sprouts of what appeared to be diseased parsley, I was too intoxicated by other enthusiasms to care. When I studied the advertisements and learned of miraculous elixirs which would, overnight, cause the desert to blossom like a rose, I was so enthralled that instead of behaving like a sensible person, and writing letters for small samples, I immediately rushed out and sent telegrams for quite inordinate amounts. And when the magic liquid did nothing at all, except fill the garden with a smell of stale fish and cover everything it touched with a dark brown stain, I still did not care.

Never did anybody spend such fantastic sums on such a tiny patch of earth. I had forgotten the Wall Street crash; a considerable sum was still coming in every week from the Cochran revue, and a like amount from books and journalism, and whenever I wanted to indulge some new extravagance I had only to dash off a short story about nothing in particular. It was a curious situation. On one occasion, with lunatic optimism, I decided that it would be possible to create a grove of mimosas in the middle of a wind-swept field of sullen clay. Mimosas, of course, *will* grow in some sheltered valleys in the extreme south — and against a wall they will flourish even in Hampshire and parts of Sussex. But to ask a mimosa to flower in an open field in the Midlands is like asking a débutante to cross the Steppes in a dance frock.

Nevertheless I insisted that it could and must be done. From a semi-tropical nursery in Cornwall twenty mimosas were ordered — by telegram. A few moments later I was speeding at sixty miles an hour to Peterborough in order to purchase large quantities of muslin with which to build a sort of tent to put over them. That same afternoon startled workers were dragged from the neighbouring fields — heavily bribed — and ordered to dig holes, drive stakes and erect shelter, as though their lives depended upon it. It must have been a fantastic scene. There was a high wind, the muslin streamed out in all

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directions, flapping in people's faces and tripping us up. But by nightfall the thing was finished.

The mimosas arrived by passenger train, and were rushed to the field by taxi. As they were lifted out of their crates, the frail, feathery leaves seemed to be shuddering at the prospect before them. They were hurried into the tent, and planted in holes which I had deluged with so much of the latest fertilizer that they were almost swimming in it. I was so excited that I could not leave them alone, and spent the next few days running backwards and forwards between the field and the cottage to see if they were all right. It was agony to have to return to London, and I was constantly on the telephone making inquiries about them.

Their end was dramatic. About a month later there was a wild blizzard and a heavy fall of snow. The weight of the snow brought the tent crashing to the ground, the slender stems of the mimosas were snapped and the wind did the rest.

This was a story I did not tell in *Down the Garden Path*. Nobody would have believed it; besides, it hardly reflected credit on me. It was on a par with Balzac's pineapples and Louis XIV's lakes at Marly.

Three years passed by in this way, years of trial and usually of error, but always of excitement. I could only spend a small fraction of my life at the cottage, but my heart was always there, and my hopes and dreams. I was learning all the time . . . learning to keep step with the slow and lovely rhythm of nature. Gone were the days of muslin tents, of extravagant fertilizers; I was growing wise in the shelter of a common hedge, and gathering my own leaf-mould with hands that were hard and dirty.

Then I began to keep a diary, and one summer morning, reading it through, I thought that some of it was funny. I remember that the passage which amused me was a brief memo at the beginning of my second winter. It read:

Do something about Mrs. M's cow.

Next winter there must be a SEA of aconites. Repeat SEA.

Give up idea of eucalyptus.

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Tell Sisman *not to go near* iris bed. I want to do it all myself.  
Be FIRM. Repeat FIRM. Otherwise he will be at it again.

Having nothing better to do at the time, I began to enlarge the diary, and to give it the form of a narrative. It was all very gay and haphazard; it was hardly like writing a book at all; as I said before, it was more like arranging a bunch of mixed flowers. And as the flowers drifted on to the paper, so the characters seemed to come and join them, to step through the window, with its frame of fragrant jasmine, and laugh and talk by my side.

So many people from all over the world have written to me about this book — was it true? Did it all really happen? — that perhaps I may be excused for mentioning that only two of the characters in it and its sequels<sup>1</sup> were taken from life; one was 'the Professor', the other was 'Miss Hazlitt'. On the principle that 'shop' is always amusing — even writers' 'shop'! — the reader may be interested to learn how these characters were evolved, and from whom.

### § 11

The original of 'the Professor' is my old friend, Professor A. M. Low. A glance at *Who's Who* is enough to awe the average layman with the extent of his scientific achievements; I am not competent to speak of these. All that matters, for our purpose, is that he is the only distinguished scientist I have ever known who has made me feel that science could be as absorbing as art — and as satisfying to the sense of beauty.

He is eternally unexpected. One of the first things he ever said to me was: 'Why should a wheel be round? Why should it not be square — or triangular?' I can see him, as I write, posing that remarkable question in his shambles of a study in Chiswick. In those days, he was a very young man with a shock of black hair, a pale, impish face, a stoop and a nervous blink.

<sup>1</sup> *A Thatched Roof* and *A Village in a Valley*.

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(Today he is very much the same, though the hair is grey and the face is more impish than ever.)

I had gone to interview him for the *Sunday Dispatch* about a speech he had made to the British Institute of Patentees, of which he was later the president. A number of challenging paradoxes from the speech had been quoted in the press, and my editor suggested that he might be good for an interview. He was more than good, he was superb, and for years afterwards whenever the editorial page needed a breath of fresh air, I would ring up Low and go to see him, with the happiest results. In view of my total lack of scientific knowledge or inclination, much of what he said must have been wasted, but the little that I could understand was always exciting. I remember, in particular, his theory that our sense of rhythm — which is of course the 'in-the-beginning' of all art — derived from the time when life was emerging from the sea to the land, and hovered on the world's beaches, for some few million years of divine hesitation, waiting for the tides to bring food. Whether that is pure science is debatable; it is certainly pure poetry — it links the sweep of the Ninth Symphony with the elemental surge of creation.

He was a sort of scientific Shelley; music often disgusted him; on account of this very tidal theory, to him it was stomachic. He was an airy, ethereal being; many things about the human body repelled him, in particular, eating. 'It is profoundly depressing,' he said, 'to think of the amount of time that men spend in pushing dead animals into holes in their heads.' He seemed to *resent* the body . . . it was a marvellous machine, of course, but such foolish mistakes seemed to have been made while it was in the blue-print stage. To him an appendix was as irritating as an old-fashioned carburettor.

Even if his mind had not been, as his works have proved, of exceptional brilliance and originality, he would have been an ideal person to 'put in a book'; Barric himself could not have devised a character who was a bundle of more endearing tricks. He was always inventing; even when he was engaged on high priority research for the explosives department, during the war,

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to say nothing of his great work on wireless control, he was producing light-hearted novelties in his spare time. One day, badly in need of a mental tonic, I went to see him. When I arrived he said: 'Let's go for a drive in the car; I want some fresh air; I've been working on a *loathesome* explosive; it makes me feel like a wild beast, but I suppose it has to be done.'

As we entered the car he handed me a little package.

'Your invention,' he said.

'My invention?'

'Don't you remember the last time you came here you asked me if I wouldn't invent something specially for *you*? Well — there it is.'

Feeling touched and flattered I undid the package.

'But it's only a cigarette!'

'A special sort of cigarette. Light it and see!'

'It won't explode?'

'I hope not.'

We got in the car and drove, in rather erratic circles, round Chiswick. I continued to smoke the cigarette, somewhat apprehensively. Nothing happened; and that, as Sherlock Holmes might have said, was just the point. When you smoke a cigarette something always does happen — the ash drops off. This did not. It remained firmly attached; it drooped slightly, but it showed no sign of falling off.

The Professor beamed at me. 'You see?' he said. 'Last time you came for a drive in the car the ash went all over your waistcoat. So I just threaded a little strip of asbestos through your cigarette and now . . . no ash!'

It was trivial, but it was endearing. And some of the happiest hours of my life were spent walking, in imagination, with the Professor down the garden path, and recapturing the echo of his conversation through the whisper of the wind in the trees.

### § III

The other 'real' character in the garden books was 'Miss Hazlitt'.

Miss Hazlitt — that is not her real name, but it will save her embarrassment — first came into my life when I was seven. She was my governess. She was a comely young woman, but even in those days she was a saint — a laughing saint who, one felt, could swop jokes with the cherubim. To her every word of the Bible was literally true, and every blade of grass on the lawn glistened in a divine radiance. In thinking of her one is reminded of the story of the poet Blake when he was a little boy. His mother smacked him because he came in and told her that Moses was sitting in an elm tree at the bottom of the garden. He was deeply grieved — because, to him, Moses *was* sitting in the tree — why, he could see him so clearly that he could even draw a picture of him. Miss Hazlitt was like that. In her eyes was the light of one who sees the angels and hears them sing.

Somewhere in my attic is a bundle of faded exercise books filled with pressed wild flowers, beautifully mounted, which I picked with Miss Hazlitt in the Devonshire lanes. A faint patina of gold still lingers on the petals of the celandines, and the little clusters of harebells are still tinged with blue. The stems of the flowers were gummed with tiny strips of paper, and under each flower, in a neat copy-book hand, we inscribed the Latin name.

These were among the few happy days I had in a childhood which was set against a background of perpetual storm; they shine in my memory like shafts of light through banks of lowering cloud.

Though Miss Hazlitt was a saint she was in no way sanctimonious. She was far too excited by the eternal parade of beauty which God daily provided for her. God was everywhere; He was in the bluebell wood . . . He had been painting there; He was also in the old rosewood piano . . . you could hear Him quite distinctly when you played Mozart. Miss Hazlitt had a very sweet speaking voice which constantly soared into a high, ecstatic *Oh!* when something in the divine parade particularly delighted her. The dewdrops on a spider's web, a dish of yellow raspberries, the frost on a window-pane — they all called forth this trill of delight. It was as though she had a bird in her throat.



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In after years — for though we drifted far apart there was always a link between us — she was to know suffering and hardship, but the bird in her throat was never stilled. Pain, to her, was only an extra proof of the divine attention; even in hospital, when she learned that an operation had been unsuccessful and that she would be obliged to undergo another one, she cried: 'Oh — I am so thankful. He is testing me again!' And in her voice was the same incomparable timbre of ecstasy with which she had greeted her discovery of the first white violets in the hedge at the bottom of the lane.

She puts me in mind, every time I see her, of a stained glass window. It is a clumsy metaphor, but I can think of none other to convey the curious radiance that seems to hover about her homely, ageing figure. There *are* women like that — women through whom you feel the light shines, and, in shining, casts a glow in their wake. If my pen were agile enough no doubt I could contrive a paraphrase of Shelley's dome of many coloured glass, still undimmed by all too familiar quotation. Through Miss Hazlitt one really does seem to see the white radiance of eternity. But it is hued and stained by many country colours; the light filters through her mind as the sun through the golden, outstretched arms of the October woods.

### § I V

The rest of the characters in the book came 'out of my head', as far as any characters can ever be said to come out of an author's head. However, they seem to have been real enough to my readers, and one in particular — 'Mrs. M', a tiresome bossy woman whom I invented as a neighbour — has developed into such a personality on her own that I constantly receive letters addressed to her, marked 'Kindly Forward'. I don't think one could have a nicer compliment.

When the book came out it immediately became, by one of those mysteries of popular taste, a best-seller. It still is. It has been parodied, anthologized, snipped up into calendars, set to

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music in revues. The modest little garden became a place of pilgrimage. There are replicas of 'Allways' throughout the world; perhaps the strangest I ever encountered was on the shores of the Dead Sea, where the garden path was bordered by a few windswept bushes of scrub, bravely thrusting their roots into a soil of almost solid salt. There was also an 'Allways' at Darjeeling, eight thousand feet up within sight of the violet-tinted snows of the Himalayas — an 'Allways' where the branches of the trees were thickly festooned by giant clusters of the same variety of orchid of which I had once produced a single specimen, with almost apoplectic pride, in my tiny greenhouse. Perhaps the most luxurious example was the model of the cottage and garden which formed the chief feature of one of the *Daily Mail* Exhibitions. It was a faithful, life-size reproduction, and there was only one thing wrong with it; every inch of every bed was stifled with immense and perfect blooms, glistening arrogantly under the arc lamps. On the opening day I had to lead the late Princess Helena Victoria, together with a number of other minor royalties, down the garden path. She blinked at the floral bonfire for a few moments, turned to me, and said: 'Are there *really* so many flowers in your garden?' I was bound to answer: 'No ma'am. God forbid!' After which, we became firm friends and spent an agreeable hour discussing the habits of the fuchsia, which is among my hundred favourite flowers.

I cannot end this story — which, I fear, sounds somewhat bragging and self-satisfied — without paying a tribute to Rex Whistler. His exquisite illustrations gave to all the Chronicles of Allways a *cachet* which they might otherwise have lacked. Whenever I was writing about Allways he was with me, sometimes in the flesh and sometimes in the spirit, and in many of the pages there is the echo of his laughter.

Here is one of the letters he wrote when we were discussing the illustrations to *A Village in a Valley*. I had asked him to 'put in lots of cupids', because he drew them so prettily and it was fun to see them pirouetting at the end of a chapter or flying across the title-page.

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Dear but implacable Beverley: I do think you should curb your passion for cupids. They have gone up. They were only a guinea each for *Down the Garden Path*, but they were such a wow in that masterpiece that they are now thirty shillings. Even the small ones. And as you seem to want one on nearly every page, that will run Cape into about £250 for cupids alone, and my contract is only for a hundred guineas. Of course, we might compromise and have some of them partly concealed behind things, but that would make my bill frightfully complicated. Something like this:

To left leg of one cupid protruding from cloud	£0 17 6
To noses and ankles of two cupids hiding in sweet-briar.....	£1 11 4
To bottom of one cupid concealed behind blasted oak.....	19 3
	£3 8 1

You see what a lot of trouble you are causing me? But seriously, it is such fun to work with you that I suppose I shall have to put in as many of the little beasts as I can manage. As ever, REX

P.S. How is 'God' standing up to this ghastly weather?

I should explain that 'God' was a lovely drawing of an old man which he made one day on an outside wall of the cottage. It was about a foot square and it was enclosed in a natural frame of oak beams. It was swiftly drawn in pencil, but it had the mastery of a sketch by Blake. Although it was open to the wind and the weather, with no protection save the overhanging eaves of thatch, it still survives, clear and unfaded.

'God' used to puzzle visitors to the cottage; they thought it strange that so fine a drawing should have been made so casually. One day an old lady, peering at it, asked me: 'Who is this?' I did not like to say 'God', as it sounded irreverent, so instead I said, 'Moses.' She frowned and observed with some severity: 'It's not *my* idea of Moses.' I have often wondered what her idea of Moses really was.

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When Rex was killed in Normandy, only a few weeks before the end of the war, a special bitterness was felt by the many who loved him. The monstrous stupidity of his death should not have been permitted; it is a reproach to any nation that it should fling its genius so carelessly into the furnace of war.

Granted, he longed to fight. This sensitive, gentle creature, with his exquisitely evocative pen . . . his fingers itched, with a splendid perversity, for the bayonet and the hand-grenade. Like any decent artist, he hated the idea that his talents should shield him; he felt a passionate need to proclaim his fellowship with the common man. This fellowship he did proclaim, to the death. True, by that death England has gained another hero, another legend, to be hung like a tattered flag in the Hall of Fame, side by side with the fading banner of Rupert Brooke. But we could have spared the legend. For we have lost — only God knows what we have lost. There are no heights which Rex might not have scaled, had he been spared.

It happened that on the very day of his death — maybe at the very hour — I saw for the first time one of his finest works, the great mural which he painted in Lord Anglesey's dining-room at Plass Noewyd. It is a creation of the highest accomplishment and imaginative power. It shows a long hilly coast, crowded with tiny towns and winding streets, tumbling down to a sea on which many lovely ships are sailing. There are harbours and jetties and palazzos and arcades, and teeming groups of lively figures. And though every inch is painted with the meticulous delicacy of a seventeenth-century master of the Dutch School, over the whole panorama there broods an unearthly light; if ever there were magic casements, one says to oneself, they are here . . . and here indeed are the first of the faery lands forlorn.

'Rex began by saying that he was going to paint the hills you see outside the window,' said Lady Anglesey. 'But as usual it turned into something else, something much richer and more wonderful. It seems so hideous to think of where he is today.'

Early next morning the news came through that he had been shot through the head, leading a counter-attack near Caen.

## THE WORLD REMEMBERED

IT was not only the wind in the trees I heard, as I worked in my garden. It was the sound of gunfire, very faint but very clear, from over the distant hills.

That is perhaps a stilted way of putting it, but it does describe the curiously physical way in which I sensed the gradual approach of war. Like any reasonable being in the early 'thirties, I could read the signs in the newspapers, and could make the all too obvious deductions. But my own reactions were almost — to employ a much abused word — psychic. I used to wake up in the middle of the night, half suffocated, tearing from my face a loathsome object which in my dreams had turned itself into a gas mask. I suppose this is rather funny, in retrospect. Or is it?

I began to get very angry with those ghostly guns and with the people who were firing them. And I was not used to being angry in academic causes. (For war, in 1931, was still academic, still 'unthinkable' — the adjective we always seem to employ to describe those things of which we think most constantly.) I could not make it out — this sudden earnestness. It was not like me at all. In the middle of some particularly crazy and extravagant party at the cottage I would hear the sound of the guns, and would leave everybody, whistle gloomily to my dog and set off for a long walk through a lonely valley. And we would both come back with our tails between our legs.

This preoccupation with war began to affect my work. Cochran, as he had already announced in the press, had expected me to do another revue for him but somehow — with all due respect to Cochran — the thought of producing another mountain of triviality was unbearable. I simply could not work myself into the necessary state of frenzy over a black-out line or an opening chorus. True, I wrote *Evensong* — but that was in a dream-like interlude of three months' intensive work in the

south of France. When I returned to England I seemed to hear the guns more clearly than ever. I began to wonder if I was going mad. To try to stop them, I decided to give the cottage a miss for a while. And I plunged once again — for the last time, as it happened — into the life of London.

## § I I

Maybe I pursued pleasure with a particularly feverish gusto because I was aware that, for me at any rate, a different sort of life was waiting round the corner. It was a very cheap and obvious sort of pleasure. I have a memory of drinking an inordinate number of cocktails in long, cool rooms with the plane trees outside the window — before luncheon, after tea, before dinner.

The gayest luncheons were at Lady Cunard's house at the corner of Grosvenor Square. Gossip writers have scribbled endlessly about Emerald Cunard, but she is very difficult to capture on paper. In those days she was tiny and pink and crinkled. And she was not very different when she died; she was still tiny and *couleur de rose*. She was like a very exotic bird, and her natural *milieu* was a gilded cage. At her best she was one of the most brilliant conversationalists I have ever known — and again the bird-like simile is apposite, for her talk was a series of delicious trills and roulades, with sudden quite irrelevant cadenzas.

Although she was always charming to me, and to any other young men in whom she detected talent, there were times when we found her a little alarming. At her own luncheons she always arrived late. From half-past one onwards the front door at Grosvenor Square would admit a series of distinguished guests, who were not always acquainted with one another, and for at least a quarter of an hour they would stand about making desultory conversation which was at times inclined to flag, for if one is not aware whether one is talking to the wife of the Chilean ambassador or to a new Spanish contralto, or to neither, one is at a disadvantage.

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And then in would dance Emerald and immediately the tempo of the party would quicken, and by the time we sat down to luncheon the identity of one's neighbour did not seem to matter.

She insisted on general conversation. That was when she was 'alarming'. She would suddenly turn to me or to some other modest member of the party and say: 'Mr. Churchill has just been telling me the most dreadful things about Signor Mussolini. What do *you* think of Signor Mussolini?' (Needless to say, she would have phrased it more elegantly, but she always made that sort of frontal attack, leaving one no means of escape.) And it is difficult to make instantaneous epigrams about dictators to a party of eminent strangers, particularly when one's mouth is full of spaghetti.<sup>1</sup>

I remember walking away from one of her luncheon parties with George Moore, who had a deep affection for her, and I wish that I had been a shorthand writer, for all the way home, down Grosvenor Street, through Hyde Park and across Belgrave Square to his home in Ebury Street he indulged in a long, absent-minded soliloquy in which he searched his mind for metaphors which would be appropriate to her. 'She is a wandering voice,' he said — 'She is a bird lost in a deep wood.' Pausing in the middle of the road, ignoring the angry hoots of taxis — 'She is a fountain' — Hoot! Hoot! — 'She is a fountain playing in the moonlight.' I was glad when we reached the haven of Hyde Park, because his quest for metaphors had seemed likely to involve us in destruction. ('She is a silver birch — She is something from a sketchbook by Degas.') Only one metaphor was derogatory. It was when we reached the doorstep of his famous house. Closing his umbrella sharply he shook the rain-

<sup>1</sup> The mention of Mussolini tempts me to tell a story about him which, I fear, is quite irrelevant. The heroine of it was one of the bravest and wittiest old ladies I ever knew — the late Lady Charnwood. When she was in Rome she asked the British ambassador to arrange an interview with the Duce, for whom she had little respect. She was a cripple, and when Mussolini saw her hobbling slowly across the immense room in which he held his audiences, he rather sulkily rose to his feet and helped to escort her to her chair. 'Do you speak Italian, madame?' he asked, when she had sat down. 'Yes!' she replied. 'But only in the imperative!'

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drops from his coat and snapped: 'But why does she waste so many of her talents on such empty people? She is a Christmas cracker!'

It was only a momentary irritation. As we said goodbye he gave me a melancholy smile. 'I think the fountain one is best,' he sighed.

Another hostess of whom I saw a good deal in those days was the lovely Lady Lavery. I need not attempt a description of her, for the portraits of Hazel Lavery are scattered throughout the galleries of the world. Her husband, John Lavery, could find no more beautiful woman for his brush; indeed, his whole career was a long love story, told in paint.

When I knew her, Hazel was no longer young, but the superb bone structure of her face, with her immense eyes, was enough to give her an unforgettable distinction. For the rest, with an endearing frankness, she covered up the traces of age with more paint than her husband had ever used on any of his canvases. Never was there so startling a *maquillage* of pinks and creams, never did eyelids droop under so heavy a weight of mauve. At a distance, in the shadows, the effect was of remarkable juvenility . . . at closer contact it was — well — startling.

In those days she had taken Ramsay MacDonald under her wing; she was one of the first London hostesses to go 'left'. She was not tiresome about it; she wore her Labour convictions lightly, like a red rosette pinned on to an elegant gown. At some of her luncheons she made great play with this colour. I remember one at which there was a great centre-piece of red carnations, and the menu was arranged in terms of this colour, beginning with pink caviar and ending with a blood-red raspberry *soufflé*.

MacDonald, who was then Prime Minister, appeared to enjoy these elegant political fripperies. He expanded amiably over his glass of wine — red, of course — with a scarlet *dragée* to nibble in his fingers. One of his best Scottish stories has stayed in my memory. It was about an old sinner who was called to the judgment seat on the last day. Jehovah regarded him sternly, and proceeded to enumerate all the pains of Hell which were awaiting him as a result of his past misdemeanours.



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““Oh Lord!” cried the wicked old man, “if only I had kenned what the punishment would have been! But I didna ken!” Whereupon . . .’ (I wish I could capture Ramsay MacDonald’s rich accent) ‘. . . Whereupon the Lor-r-d, in His infinite mer-r-cy, looked down upon him, and the Lor-r-d said: “Well, ye ken the noo!”’

### § III

How one managed to do any work in London, in the atmosphere of the early 'thirties, is a mystery. The answer, I suppose, is that one didn't. Whenever I had anything to write that demanded concentration I flew over to Paris for a few days. I still fought shy of the cottage; in the quiet of the garden those ghostly guns could no longer be ignored.

Floating round Paris in those days was a tragic comedian called Avery Hopwood, who made a huge income from writing dubious farces about people who popped in and out of bed with the regularity of cuckoo clocks. To the younger generation of Broadway his name will probably be unknown, but at that time he was worthy of better things, for he had a taut and salty brain. He was one of the most hideous men I have ever encountered, with a purple skin, a wandering nose and a left eye that seemed entirely independent of the right. I was therefore somewhat surprised when one day in the Ritz bar he staggered over to me and asked me to dine.

‘I don't know you . . .’ I began.

‘That's why I'm asking you,’ he countered. ‘If you *did* know me, you'd certainly refuse.’

There was something endearing about this frankness. So we went out to dine at Larue's.

It was a dreadful meal. Avery was drunk when it began and a good deal drunker when it ended. When we got outside I said to him: ‘Now we are going home.’ Avery gave a hollow laugh. Oh yeah? We were going home, were we? That was rich. That took the Pulitzer prize. Not only were we not going home, we were going to a certain bordel, where we would

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disport ourselves in a manner which would have made Nero draw up his tunic in a maidenly gesture, and flounce from the room, hissing.

We did not go to the bordel, because at that moment Avery fell flat on his face in the gutter. I took him home, undressed him and put him to bed. There was a little gold box in his pocket, containing a white powder which spilt on the floor. When Avery saw this he sprang out of bed and knelt down on the carpet, clawing at the powder and sniffing it — sobbing, blaspheming, giggling, wise-cracking. It was a horrible sight, Hogarthian, obscene. I was physically shocked, because I have always had a horror of drugs. Yet I could not help feeling, as I left him, that he was a nice gentle creature *au fond*.

A few days later, a set-piece of white and yellow orchids, several times larger than the page who carried it, was delivered at my hotel, together with a charming and witty note from Avery, informing me that he was still stricken with remorse at the recollection of his outrageous behaviour, and would I show that he was really forgiven by dining with him on the following night? There need be no fear of any regrettable conduct, for Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas were to be our companions — ‘... and Gertrude always makes me stinking sober.’ So along I went.

One’s first sight of Gertrude Stein was startling, like seeing Gibraltar at dawn; the simile is apposite because there was something rock-like about her; there was also something sturdy and sane, and in an odd way Victorian, by which I mean that she could very easily be visualized as one of Florence Nightingale’s lieutenants. In terms of scent she was carbolic; in terms of material, flannelette; it is strange that this home-spun figure should have been the centre of so exotic and advanced a circle in Paris; stranger still that she should have been, from the outset, the most impassioned of Picasso’s champions. One would have said that Landseer was more her cup of tea.

This dinner was even more disastrous than its forerunner.

We met in the Ritz. Gertrude Stein was wearing a black dress and a man’s cap; Miss Toklas, who fluttered timidly in the

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background, was attired in a pale green Japanese kimono; Avery — already in an advanced state of intoxication — had on a very loud tweed suit which was still muddy from his latest fall in the gutter; I was modestly clad in an ancient dinner jacket. I was relieved to hear that we were dining in a private room.

Conversation was impossible; we were all too busy trying to drown Avery's obscenities, to say nothing of dodging the red wine splashing from his glass. The climax came when he threw a beaker of brandy on to the floor, sprawled over the table, and pushed over to me the little gold box of cocaine. This was too much for the Misses Stein and Toklas. They rose to their feet, and suggested that I should show them to their car — a request with which I was only too happy to comply. After that I returned to Avery, took him home, and for the second and last time put him to bed. I never heard of him again until I read of his death in the south of France. He had gone down to the beach one night, and walked out into the sea, fully clothed, singing a popular song. It was a typical tragic comedian's death. I wish I knew why I still felt he was really such a nice person.

All this is really leading us to Gertrude Stein's studio, for on the following day when I telephoned Avery's apologies — which, of course, he had not expressed — she asked me to call and see her Picassos. I was eager to do so, not only because they were supposed to be the finest in Paris, but also because the later Picasso was incomprehensible to me and I thought that perhaps through the eyes of Gertrude Stein some of the mystery might be solved.

So there we were, at three o'clock in the afternoon, with Miss Stein still in the black dress and Miss Toklas still in the kimono, standing in front of a number of pictures which looked to me like the ravings of a homicidal maniac. I said to Miss Stein:

'I hope I'm reasonably educated and reasonably intelligent. I think I'm reasonably "advanced" — at any rate Cézanne and Van Gogh were among my schoolboy crushes. Most important of all I'm a mass of goodwill. I know that in his early days Picasso drew like an angel and painted like a poet. In other words, Picasso's right and I'm wrong. All this we can take for granted.

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But what can I *do* about it? How can my eyes be opened?"

Whereupon Miss Stein proceeded to show me. And since there must be thousands of other people all over the world, lovers of art who are not merely content to say, 'I know what I like' but are eager to learn, people who are intelligent enough to be humble, since, in short, there must be thousands of people in the same Picasso quandary as myself, it may interest them to learn the secrets of the great Picasso mystery from the lips of the high priestess herself.

Unfortunately, I am quite unable to unravel this mystery. For three hours and a half by the clock, beaming with amiable intentions, squinting with concentration, sweating with endeavour and constantly sustained by draughts of strong Indian tea, I glared at those pictures, trying to see beauty in them, significance in them, design in them, anything at all in them — with a total lack of success.

Thus. Picture one. Half a squashed violin, decorated in the centre by a black moustache. A border motif of what appear to be decapitated frogs. Another moustache in the bottom left-hand corner, brown this time, and sprouting rather oddly from the palm of an upturned hand. To round it all off, a real fragment of 'Paris Soir' stuck on with glue, and a little real gravel, which had apparently been hurled at the canvas at random.

Wide-eyed, and positively steaming with benevolent intentions, I studied the masterpiece — this way and that, bending down, turning round, taking deep breaths, beginning all over again, trying always to follow what Miss Stein explained.

'Don't you see the difference between Picasso and the old masters?' she was saying.

Oh yes . . . I saw *that*. There was no difficulty about *that*. None whatever.

'Don't you see how he leaves out all the non-essentials? How he puts in nothing that is not absolutely necessary?'

That was not so easy. Were *two* moustaches absolutely necessary? Would not one have sufficed? Could we not also have dispensed with some of the gravel? And would not the violin have been nicer unsquashed?

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‘Can’t you see the *line*?’ she demanded in desperation.

Unfortunately I thought she said ‘lion’, and I proceeded to devote all my energies to finding this animal. Perhaps it was lurking behind one of the moustaches? Perhaps it was crouching in the violin, ready to spring upon us? Perhaps it was cunningly secreted behind the gravel?

It was not till I timidly asked if a streak of blue paint might be its tail that Miss Stein observed, somewhat shortly, that she was not talking about ‘lions’ but ‘lines’.

This comedy continued, as I have previously observed, for the space of three and a half hours, and I trust that Miss Stein, if she ever reads these words, in the heaven to which she has undoubtedly departed will forgive me for giving her exposition so flippant an appellation. I am quite convinced that she was sincere. I am equally convinced that Picasso, when he chooses, can out-draw, out-paint and out-think any artist in the world today.

But most of all I am convinced that as long as I live the prospect of moustaches growing out of violins surrounded by decapitated frogs — the whole adorned with real gravel — will, for some occult reason, fail to arouse in me the same pleasurable emotions as are aroused by the sight of a spray of apple-blossom, or a face well painted, or even an honest kitchen chair.

### § I V

I never stayed long in Paris. Constantly I flew back to London, feeling that there was something better waiting for me to do. But I never seemed to do it. It was the same old routine, day after day, night after night — talking incessantly, laughing a lot, with the cocktail shaker keeping up a perpetual staccato accompaniment in the background. The garden was waiting, work was waiting, Time was standing still . . . and God alone knows how I wasted it. As this is an honest attempt at self-portraiture, the reader will perhaps be entertained by a close-up of myself at this period at some typical moment — let us say dressing for dinner.

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It is an evening in June, and the sunlight streams through the window of the little house in Westminster. As I put the finishing touches to my tie it never occurs to me that I am wearing a costume which, in my own lifetime, is destined to become as extinct as the plumage of the dodo. All the accessories are nostalgically 'period' — they might have been listed in a story by Michael Arlen; tails by Lesley and Roberts in Hanover Square, waistcoat by Hawes and Curtis of the Piccadilly Arcade, silk hat by Locke in St. James's Street, monk shoes by Fortnum and Mason's of Piccadilly, crystal and diamond links by Boucheron of the Rue de la Paix, gold cigarette case by Asprey of Bond Street, a drop of rose geranium on my handkerchief from the ancient shop of Floris, in Jermyn Street. And on the dressing-table, waiting to be sipped, an ice-cold 'side-car', complete with its crimson cherry.

In this era of utilitarian squalor, the wearing of such a costume — unless it were in rags and tatters — would probably be regarded as a criminal offence. And there will doubtless be persons who regard the whole set-up as deplorable. Why? In those days it was the recognized uniform of a young man about town. I was a young man, and I was 'about town'. Moreover, I had *earned* the right to wear that uniform. With the exception of the gold cigarette case, everything I wore had been gained by solid hard work, by sitting at a desk from nine till one and three till six.

In any case, whether the picture attracts or repels, it has certainly vanished for ever, and neither I nor any young man who treads the same sort of path will ever be able to pick so many primroses on the way. The house of Lesley and Roberts still stands in Hanover Square, but its shelves are no longer crowded, its clients are impoverished and the traditions on which it flourished have been rejected by the world. Hawes and Curtis received a direct hit, one night in 1940, and the last of its silks and its linens and its *piqués* vanished in the inferno. It has bravely reappeared in Piccadilly, but it is a hard task for all firms of such quality to survive the stifling restrictions of our period — and even worse, the subtly poisonous propaganda

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that makes of shabbiness a moral virtue. As for Floris, too, it still stands, like an enchanted casket, and even now its fragrances are as sweet as ever. But Government ordains that they may only be distilled drop by drop, though the world has so much need of them. And over the soft carpets, in desperate quest of a tiny bottle of 'Tantivy' or 'New Mown Hay', stretches that hideous monster of our modern world, the queue.

To return to the little house in Westminster, and the young man in the sunlight before the mirror. All these luxuries, as I say, were mine, and many more. Yet they meant precisely nothing.

Why?

Often I would apostrophize myself before that same mirror. 'What is wrong with you? Why aren't you happy? Why do you feel that if somebody told you that this moment was your last, you'd merely shrug your shoulders and say — very well, so be it? Are you utterly selfish? Your bank book can give a fairly honest "no" to that. Are you just spoiled?' (After a pause) 'Maybe . . . but *can* you be completely "spoiled" if you work hard for eight hours a day? Is it some peculiar form of sexual inhibition? Far from it. Is it liver? No . . . I played six sets of tennis this afternoon. Then what in the name of heaven and earth *is* it?'

I would see the figure in the mirror shake its head in bewilderment. And then I would glance at my watch, find that I was late for the party, swallow my cocktail and run downstairs to the waiting car. It was streamlined, sleek and elegant, and one would have thought that it was yet another reason for causing a young man's heart to sing. But my heart did not sing. It beat fast and strong, but there was a hideous sense that it was beating in a vacuum, and that it did not very much matter whether it was beating at all.

### § v

The breaking point was not far off. This idiotic life was getting me down. I could not go on much longer, drinking cocktails and talking nonsense while the clouds were gathering

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over Europe, with the tragedy of Geneva hastening to its final act, and all the disciples of rearmament beginning to raise their voices. I knew that sooner or later I should have to do something about it. That must sound intolerably arrogant, but I was still young enough to believe that faith could work miracles and — this is the important point — it really did seem possible in those days that an individual might 'do something about' war. It had not become the normal condition of existence, as it is now.

In particular I was revolted by the recrudescence of indiscriminate hatred for the Germans. I had been to Berlin and had seen the cynical despair to which a great people had been reduced. I had wandered alone through Bavaria — which, more than anywhere in Europe, represents the fine flower of civilization, and had talked, heart to heart, with young men and women who were desperately in need of our friendship. It was intolerable to return to England only to find that the odious word 'Hun' was once again creeping into people's conversation. 'Hun', to me, was and is an international word, with no local connotation. I know plenty of 'Huns' in the shires.

I felt so strongly about this that I began to make scenes at parties, telling people to shut up when they glibly chattered about the inevitability of 'having another crack at the Hun'. One of these scenes is perhaps worth mentioning, because it brought me into personal conflict with one of the most distinguished European statesmen of the day.

It happened at a luncheon party at Lady Colefax's. Sybil Colefax has such a detestation of publicity that I will write as little as possible about her — though it would be a pleasure to pay tribute to her courage, her wisdom and her impeccable taste. She has never been rich and she would have pooh-poohed the suggestion that she had a *salon*; the word would have been too pompous for the gay and natural groups of people whom she gathered around her. (Though, in fact, they themselves did most of the 'gathering'.) Yet nearly every 'celebrity' in the old and new worlds must at one time or another have walked up the staircase at Argyll House, where she lived in her middle age. It was a gracious old Georgian dwelling with a tiny courtyard



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that gave on to the King's Road in Chelsea. It had a high-walled garden at the back, with iris beds all round and an ancient grape vine that rambled up to the roof.

On the occasion of this particular luncheon party the guest of honour was Sir Austen Chamberlain who, of all the statesmen in the inter-war periods, was most responsible for the shape of things that were to come. There were about a dozen other people, but the only one whom I remember was Lady Cunard, who was sitting on Austen's left. She was at the top of her form. She was only twenty minutes late for luncheon, instead of her usual half-hour, she had on a hat that looked like a *mousse* of parma violets, and her strange little face turned this way and that as she enthralled us all with one of her incomparable monologues.

But suddenly the monologue stopped. She had been talking about the opera, of which she and Sir Thomas Beecham were of course the leading spirits. She turned to Austen and said: 'And what night will *you* come to the opera with me, Sir Austen?'

'I will come any night with such a charming lady,' he replied gallantly. Then he frowned, and added, 'Except one.'

'Except one? And which one is that?'

'Any night on which they are playing Wagner.'

'But my dear Sir Austen, why don't you like Wagner?'

The whole table listened for his reply. It came, very gravely and deliberately.

'Because I regard him as typical of the bestiality and brutality of the modern Hun.'

This was altogether too much for me. Pink in the face, shaking with indignation, I leant across the table and said: 'I beg your pardon, Sir Austen, but that seems to me one of the most deplorable remarks that can ever have been made by any British statesman.'

There was an awkward silence, and Sir Austen began to grow a little pink too.

'Even more deplorable,' I continued wildly, 'when one remembers that you were Foreign Secretary for five years, and for that reason are as responsible as any man living for the present state of Europe.'

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At which — as they say in the poem — ‘everyone suddenly burst out singing’. The rest of the lunch was an agony of embarrassment. I felt that apologies were due to Sybil, to Sir Austen, to everybody, but even if there had been a chance to apologize, the words would not come. This was a matter of principle, on which there could be no compromise.

However, on returning home, I wrote him a note, asking him to forgive an impetuous young man for his rudeness, which was due to certain very strong artistic and political convictions. I never expected to hear from him again. But that evening a letter arrived, which is perhaps worthy of publication.

Dear Beverley Nichols: There was no need to apologize. If you had been in the House of Commons as many years as I have, you would be used to taking, and giving, hard knocks.

But I would not like you to think that I am quite such a Philistine as my casual remark may have suggested. I do not see how it is possible to regard Wagner only as a composer, functioning in a vacuum. You have to consider the man himself, his life, his influence, his homage to Bismarck, for instance, and the fact that he alone, among German artists, was quick to identify himself with Bismarck’s new Reich. You have to remember his life-long distortion and brutalization of the Teutonic legends which, even as he found them, were often brutal enough. His gods and goddesses are emotional neurotics, there is a smell of blood and thunder over all his work, a perpetual call to world domination, and finally, a romantic glorification of death.

Above all, you have to remember that all these restless, barbaric tendencies are only a sublimation of the German ‘geist’. It is the spirit of German youth set to music; it was the music to which they marched in 1914; God help us if they ever decide to march to it again.

I shall never forget attending a performance of the *Walküre* when I was visiting Germany many years ago. You remember the long recitatif in the first act, with the sword plunged in the tree? When it was drawn out and flourished

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before us, I happened to look down from my box at the audience. It was a very young audience, mostly students. And the expression on their faces frightened me. They were in a state of unnatural excitement; they seemed to be gloating, waiting to spring.

And now it is I who must apologize to you, for the fear that I have evinced no proof, and have merely given further signs of what you must regard as 'prejudice'. I would gladly give what remains of my life if I could feel that you were right!

Yours sincerely,

AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN

How is your rock-garden? I miss mine more every day.

Austen Chamberlain's letter made me think. Perhaps it might have made me think even more if I had been able to compare it with Emil Ludwig's book *The Germans*, which was published about ten years later. Ludwig's chapter on Wagner is nothing more than a brilliant variation on the theme of the Chamberlain letter, which, of course, he never saw. Chamberlain said: 'I do not see how it is possible to regard Wagner only as a composer'; Ludwig writes: 'Anyone who approaches Wagner solely as a musician insults him.' Chamberlain refers to his 'life-long distortion and brutalization of the Teutonic legends'; Ludwig observes: 'He rendered the Teutonic gods and heroes as sexual giants . . . he transmogrified the knights and women of German legend into nervous men and women of his own kind and time.' Ludwig also underlines the significance of Wagner's relationship with Bismarck, and specifically quotes the theme from Act 1 of the *Walküre*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There must evidently be some strong force in this analogy, because it has independently suggested itself to so many men of such varied character. During the Munich period I happened to be staying at a house where one of the guests was Jan Masaryk, who was then the Czechoslovakian Consul. After dinner we tuned in on the radio to a Wagner concert. Masaryk became more and more restless, and finally he left the room abruptly. Afterwards he said to me: 'I could not stand it; it is exactly like a speech by Hitler; those long, windy, snarling phrases — over and over again, till one goes almost mad.' Masaryk, incidentally, was qualified to speak about music with almost as much authority as about politics, for he had inherited all the brilliance of his mother, who was one of the favourite pupils of Liszt.

## CHAPTER III

### JEUNE PREMIER

**B**EFORE going into the retreat that was necessary for the work I contemplated, I had one last long look at the bright lights — that is to say, the bright lights had one last long look at me. I became or rather, did not become, a film star.

One day I was sitting at home in London, feeling more than usually depressed, trying to decide to say 'no' to everything — to parties, to drink, to first nights and, of course, to love — knowing that I should find no peace till I had exorcized on paper the war demon that was haunting my dreams . . . when the telephone rang. It was my old friend Seymour Hicks.

Seymour Hicks is only a name to the younger generation, but as long as the art of comedy is cherished, the echo of that name will be heard down the centuries. His acting was like a perfect dry champagne — it had the same tang and sparkle and flavour of the vine. Maybe that is how actors will be recalled, like vintages; some old man will sit by the fireside in his club and shake his head and sigh: 'Do you remember that Cliquot '35?' And another old man will nod, and say: 'Yes — and do you remember Seymour Hicks in "The Man in Dress Clothes"?'

Seymour said: 'How would you like to be a film star?'

I said that I would not like it at all.

'But seriously? Would you like to play the juvenile lead in my new film?'

This is the sort of question which, in novelettes, causes heroes to push out their chins, inflate their eyes, and gulp huskily; 'I'll . . . I'll try to be worthy of you, Mr. Rottenbusch.' It had a very different effect on *me*. It caused me to look wildly around the room for some place in which to hide. There was nowhere except a large Knoll settee, which was not yet paid for. (It was one of my 'broke' periods.)

Meanwhile Seymour's persuasive tones were drifting down the wire.

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'How d'you know you can't act? You can never tell what you can do till you try. There's a part that would suit you down to the ground — nothing to do but look pleasant and behave like a gentleman. It'll be all over in no time; we'll have lots of fun and you'll have a few extra hundreds in your pocket. . . .'

No, no, no — I kept muttering. It was torture, it was death — hide! hide! But Seymour was adamant.

'At least you can make a *test*. There can't be any harm in *that*, can there?'

I felt that there could be an enormous amount of harm in it; there could be asps and boa-constrictors in it; but I was no match for Seymour.

'Very well,' I groaned. 'I will make the test.'

That, I thought, was the quickest way to put a stop to **this** nonsense. For in my wildest dreams it never seemed possible that the test could be anything but a hideous flop.

### § I I

The test, alas, was a great success, so much so that it was later shown at the Malvern Film Festival as one of the best of the year. How this could have been the case in view of the agonies I was suffering at the time, I cannot imagine. I sat back in a chair, shaking like a leaf, while a man with a pronounced squint and icy fingers plastered ochre on my cheeks. I was led like a sheep into a vast studio, and made to stand under arc lights. Then Seymour came out — very professional now — and said, in hearty tones: 'Walk over there, old boy.' I walked over there old boy. Then he said: 'Look behind those curtains, old chap.' I looked behind those curtains, old chap. And then: 'Your mother is behind those curtains, and you are astonished to see her. Get it?' My mother, I can assure the reader, was *not* behind those curtains, and I should have been more than astonished to see her in such a *galère*; however, I did as I was told, looked behind the curtains, and assumed the right maternal, or rather filial, expression.

'Splendid!' shouted Seymour, from a blaze of light in the

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background. 'Now turn towards me, and offer me a cigarette.'

'I haven't got one,' I gasped.

'Never mind. Go through the motions.'

Feeling like a rather flustered cod, I went through the motions.

'Now laugh!'

I laughed. *And* laughed. It was sheer hysteria, but apparently it registered. For all the time the cameras were creeping closer, like a lot of horrible one-eyed animals, registering my reactions. Those reactions were, to my misfortune, extraordinarily photogenic. When I saw the 'rushes', later on, I could not believe my eyes. Was it possible that this calm and elegant creature wandering round the room was really myself? Was it I who had pulled those curtains so easily, and had started back in such natural surprise at the vision of my mother? One felt, indeed, that a whole covey of mothers was crouching there. As for the laughter at the end — it was terrific.

'You see?' said Seymour. 'I knew you could do it.'

So I signed a contract binding me to play the juvenile lead, at a handsome salary, in 'Glamour', an original screen play by Seymour Hicks.

And then — I read my part. I have such a high opinion of Seymour's sense of the stage and the screen, which is usually impeccable, that he will forgive me for suggesting that 'Glamour' was not one of his happier efforts. It was probably foisted on him by the powers that be; one had the feeling that he was making the best of a bad job.

I was cast for the role of the Hon. Richard Wells, a young aristocrat in love with a beautiful young lady (also an aristocrat) played by Miss Margot Graham. My mother was played by Ellaline Terris; as for my father, I really forget who he was or if he appeared. For the first few days I thought he was a man who afterwards proved to be the butler. My *real* father — (the reader must have guessed by now that I was a bastard) — was Seymour Hicks, though of course I was not supposed to know anything so nasty. Seymour, in the play, had the role of

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a great actor; he swept about in a long cloak with immense effect; nothing quite so like Irving has been seen before or since, even in the days of Irving himself. To make the plot even more interesting, Seymour — my father — was also in love with Margot — my fiancée — and there was a tremendous scene, more than faintly reminiscent of David Garrick, when, in an orgy of self-sacrifice, he feigned drunkenness in order to revolt the delicate susceptibilities of Miss Graham, who was then thrown back, like a tulle tennis ball, upon my unaccustomed chest.

This singular story — which, for all its drawbacks, was illuminated by many flashes of Seymour's genius and Ellaline's grace — abounded in plots and counterplots. Things were always getting lost; there was, for example, a most tactless bag which Miss Graham — in the play — constantly left in compromising places. This theme was made all the more electric by the fact that — on the set, as opposed to the play — I was always losing it myself, and at the moments when I was supposed to find the bag, it was seldom discovered, and the whole play had to be held up while the wardrobe department feverishly manufactured another.

So much for the plot. Now for the acting — that is to say *my* acting. Every young person who dreams of going on the films should read the next section with all possible attention.

### § III

I had never acted in my life before, even in a village wax-works show, and I was unaware of the elementary fact that acting, for the beginner, immediately causes a number of strange diseases of the hands and feet. The arms, instead of moving in their accustomed orbit, stay rigidly pressed to the side, or if, by a supreme effort, they have been moved, remain extended in mid-air, like signposts. But the afflictions of the hands are as nothing to the afflictions of the feet. These, on any call to movement, are found to adhere to the floor, as though clamped by some curious form of psychic suction. Moreover,

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when at last they have been forced into motion, they become inextricably tangled, one with the other, so that a simple turn becomes a highly complicated contortion, suggestive of the more advanced postures of the Yogi philosophy.

These difficulties of the body, however, pale beside the difficulties of the mind; motion can be accomplished by will-power, emotion can only be conveyed by art. And that brings us to my adored one, Miss Margot Graham.

Now I liked Miss Graham very much; she was as pretty as peach blossom, she had a pleasant wit and a lively intelligence; in fact there was nothing about her to which one could take exception, unless, perhaps, it were her rather morbid passion for small brass elephants which sparkled, in glittering herds, from every corner of her flat.

However, I soon formed the impression that my own amiable feelings towards Miss Margot Graham were not reciprocated. How otherwise could one account for the behaviour of her white fox fur?

This needs a word of explanation. The fur was worn by Miss Graham on our first meeting in the play, and as soon as I saw it my heart sank. I had an uneasy feeling that it was hostile to me, that it would trip me up, or smother me, or even bite me — which was what most things — and people — in the studio seemed anxious to do.

So there I was, all made up for my first entrance, shaking with terror, waiting for the red light, with dozens of electricians, engineers, camera-men, sub-directors, call boys and, worst of all, *real* actors, glaring at me. It was a situation to try the nerve of the most complacent, for my first 'sequence' was by no means simple; it contained a number of tricky pieces of business which would have tested the resources even of a professional.

I had to make my first appearance leaning out of the window of a taxi, wreathed in boyish smiles, and shouting 'Hi Betty!' to the distant figure of Miss Margot Graham, who was standing, entirely surrounded by white fox, at the top of a flight of steps, waiting for me. Having shouted, and waved my silk hat — (which got ruffled in the process, so that we had to dim the



lights and send it back to be ironed and start all over again) — I then had to leap out, as briskly as a faun, shut the door, pay the taxi-driver, dart lightly up the steps, seize Miss Graham and kiss her with the correct blend of chastity and dash. It sounds a simple sequence; it was not; by the time we had finished it bore a startling resemblance to a hurdle race in hell. Over my left arm I had to carry my coat and hat, with my right hand I had to pay the taxi. And all the time, baring my teeth in a tortured grin, I had to keep my head turned in the direction of my adored one, who by now seemed not only surrounded but almost blotted out by the aforesaid fur. (She also seemed at least a quarter of a mile away.) As my eyes could not leave her for a second — so hot was my ardour — I usually held the half-crown in a position where it was quite impossible for the taxi-driver to get it without taking a running leap. And that meant another cut, another dimming of the lights and another starting all over again.

Little by little, hour by hour, I approached nearer to Miss Graham. We broke for lunch, which was consumed in a rather strained silence. I ate nothing; I was too busy saying to myself: 'Keep hat clear, *smile*, close door with right hand, *smile*, keep neck twisted round, *smile*, push right hand further forward when paying taxi-driver, *smile*, start up steps on left foot.'

The climax of this agony occurred when at last I attained to Miss Graham herself. Having only a dim idea of the plot, I was not aware that her coldness was assumed — on account of her supposed passion for Seymour — and I was deeply discouraged by her icy demeanour. It was like having an affair with the Statue of Liberty. A Statue of Liberty wreathed in dust sheets. For after every retake Miss Graham's impatience mounted, and so did the white fox. When I first reached her side, after lunch, slightly panting, Miss Graham was good enough to allow me access to several inches of comparatively unencumbered cheek. True, it was offered to me somewhat — how shall I say? — somewhat *hygienically*, as though it were a salad. But I could at least get a peck at it. By the time the day was well advanced, and we were all pretty well exhausted,

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even this privilege was denied me; I had to snuffle about in a mass of white fur, searching in vain for the beloved face, and giving nervous little tugs to the coat at the back of the neck.

Enough of this. Which was exactly what the director said when he saw the 'rushes'. The whole sequence was cut, and the camera, quite rightly, concentrated solely on Miss Graham, standing alone on the top of the steps, enveloped in her furry friend. The white fox had won the day.

### § I V

I will give only one more example of this humiliating experience, and for no better reason than that it still makes me laugh, even when I am writing about it.

In one of the high spots of the play, I had to interrupt a scene of high tension between my 'mother' and my 'father'. I had to prance into the room, clothed in spotless white flannels, clasping a Pekinese dog to my chest, deposit the dog playfully on the settee, take six steps to the left, kneel briskly before my mother, turn to Seymour, chuck my mother under the chin — no, chuck my mother first and *then* turn to Seymour — and say the immortal line — 'Isn't she a little peach?'

When I was first informed of the horror that was awaiting me in this scene, I had serious thoughts of booking an immediate air passage to Kenya. There, I felt, one might be safe from these humiliations. One might sit quietly in the jungle, chucking nobody under the chin; one might stare up to the tangled branches with never a danger of seeing some awful man with a spotlight, telling one to turn one's profile to the left. A profile, I felt, was something that should be cut out at birth. (Mine, in my brief film career, usually was.)

But I did not go to Kenya. I went through with it. And this time it really was the last circle of the inferno. Try as I would I could not make that line — 'Isn't she a little peach?' — sound at all spontaneous. (Try saying it yourself, in a kneeling posture, for a few hours on end, and you may see my point.) As I spoke the line, it sounded, at best, like the wail of an albatross to its

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young. I tried it in every sort of way. I paced my bedroom late at night — to the alarm of Gaskin — reciting it with infinite variations. I said: 'Isn't she a little peach?' No. That was arch. Far too arch — particularly as it had to be accompanied by the chin-chucking — and all I could do about *that* was a mixture between a V sign and a left hook. Try again. 'Isn't *she* a little peach?' But that would be pointless, because in the scene there would be no other 'she' in the room — apart, of course, from about a dozen angry females glaring at me from the wings, armed with powder-puffs, safety pins, and sal volatile. What about 'Isn't she a *little* peach?' But that wafted us, at once, into the realms of Winnie the Pooh. 'Isn't she a little *peach*?' By now, in my agony, my voice had risen to a shrill scream.

Whether my mother was, or was not, a peach of any specification whatsoever, the British film-goer had no chance to decide. Once again the whole scene was cut. For at exactly the moment when I had got everything right — (it took nearly three days' sweated labour) — at the precise psychological instant when the director was about to signal a flawless performance, with the 'isn't' and the 'she' and the 'little' and the 'peach' all perfectly delivered, with my feet in the right place and such a chin-chucking as had seldom been conceived by man or beast — at that sublime and fatal moment, the Pekinese was violently sick all over my white flannel trousers. It was too much for everybody. Too much for Seymour, too much for Ellaline, too much for the directors, and far, far too much for me.

When 'Glamour' was eventually shown at the London Pavilion, although the critics on the whole were kind, they were all puzzled by what they described as 'a certain abruptness' in some of the sequence. Mr. Beverley Nichols, they could not help noticing, constantly appeared and then — disappeared. He made an entrance with every apparent intention of saying something or doing something, but seldom said it or did it. They could not have been more right.

However, I got one fan letter. Just one. It was from Booroo-

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Booroo, which is a small township in the dry heart of Australia. It was from a young lady who thought that I had everything. I couldn't be better, she thought, from the front, from the side or from the back. I was her dream of delight. To show that she was sincere, she enclosed her own photograph.

I am not usually allured by Aborigines, but she had quite a pleasant smile.

## THE WHITE FLAG

WITH the conclusion of 'Glamour' we switch from the bright lights to the midnight oil. On the evening after the first night I sat at my desk in the cottage, a very different person, staring at a blank sheet of paper on which there glowed a golden circle cast from the rays of an old paraffin lamp. The room was very quiet; there was only the hiss of damp applewood on the open hearth. But outside there was the wind in the elms and — as always — the echo of the guns.

I could not imagine what was going to be written, nor if it would be any use; I only knew that I had to write it, whatever 'it' might prove to be. Looking back on one's emotional condition at this time, it is difficult to understand why it should have been quite so tense; after all, the danger of war was not immediate; Hitler was only just beginning to emerge from obscurity; the forces ranged on the side of peace were apparently invincible. And yet, my mind was always set as though the clock were pointing to the eleventh hour.

Whatever the reason for this prescience, there was no doubt about my reactions; they were entirely emotional, and were due to a very acute awareness of physical pain. (I have had more than my share of it in life, though I have not troubled the reader with an account of it; other people's operations are apt to be tedious.) But even if I had not myself known much suffering, I should still have been haunted by the pain of others. Nobody is more detestable than the man who lays claim to exceptional sensitivity; of all boasts this is the most empty; it does happen, however, that there are men and women to whom the thought of the world's pain is a constant spectre — people whose minds, even in the most peaceful surroundings, suddenly fashion some image of suffering so terrible that they cry aloud in protest. It is as though the brain had its own little chamber of horrors, stocked with all the twisted, tortured creatures that — con-

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sciously or subconsciously — have come their way. Most people keep the door of that chamber firmly closed; but for a few it can never be closed; time and again it swings open, propelling its particular image on to the screen of the imagination. Sometimes these images are so appalling that they cannot be exorcized by any effort of the conscious mind, however heroic; they can only be dispelled by taking action.

That was really the basis of my pacifism. It was a cloudy and unstable foundation for any philosophy, but God knows it came from the heart. It is summed up in a letter which I wrote to H. G. Wells, in 1932, after we had been arguing about conscientious objection. (This letter was afterwards enlarged to form the first chapter of *Cry Havoc!*) In it I wrote:

I believe that the discussion of war should *begin* with the personal agony of the soldier and should *end* with the political and economic frictions which result in that agony. I should like to see a model of a hideously wounded soldier on the respectable tables of the disarmament conferences.

There is a pathetic simplicity about this youthful plea. I really did feel that if only somebody could break into the conference hall at Geneva, and compel the delegates to stare at some image of scarred skin and shattered limbs, they would really suffer a change of spirit.

### § 11

But what was to be *done* about it?

I began by writing a play. 'Avalanche'<sup>1</sup> was produced in London at the Arts Theatre Club in January 1932 with Maurice Evans at the head of a brilliant cast. It is less of a play than a long and passionate argument in dramatic form. It is laid in Switzerland, 'three years hence', in the remote chalet of a young dramatist who is also a pacifist. The house-party is snowed up, and all communications with the outside world, including the radio, have broken down. In this situation, the

<sup>1</sup> This play is included in *Failures*, published by Jonathan Cape, 1933.

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dramatist plays a daring hoax; he manages to persuade his guests that war has once again broken out in Europe; and he informs them that he, for one, will have no part in it. From this point onwards he holds the stage, arguing, pleading, fighting, with one after another of his guests, who had been chosen to represent every possible shade of orthodox opinion.

'Avalanche' had what is known as a *succès d'estime*, but the commercial managers would not touch it. They said that 'people wouldn't pay to look death in the face'. They were wrong; when 'Avalanche' was produced in Vienna shortly afterwards by Germany's greatest actor, Bassermann, it ran for nearly a year.

However, though this play was a failure as a piece of evangelism, the writing of it had given point and precision to my own convictions. A great deal of 'perilous stuff' had gone into it, and it was now possible to think comparatively clearly, instead of in a red haze of emotionalism.

It was at about this period that I happened to meet, at a fellow-pacifist's house, a very remarkable young woman called Dorothy Woodman.<sup>1</sup> At first sight Dorothy was not exceptional; she was merely a pleasant-looking girl of about my own age, very quietly dressed, inclined to merge into the background. But after talking to her for a few minutes I said to my host, 'That girl has the eyes of a V.C.' The comment was apter than I knew; in the stormy years to come she was to spend a large part of her life walking into the political lions' dens of Europe, exposing every dirty political racket she could find. She had already given proof of her quality in a pamphlet, *The Secret International*, which was packed with information about the armament industry.

It was to obtain a copy of this pamphlet that I called on her, the following morning, at her office in Victoria Street, which announced its title in dusty letters on the door—The Union of Democratic Control. It sounds a formidable organization; in fact, it was largely Dorothy herself, aided by a few faithful fellow-spirits, most of them obscure and humble.

<sup>1</sup> Now Mrs. Kingsley Martin.

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This meeting was to prove one of the most important of my life. Dorothy handed me her pamphlet and said: 'You can read it now, if you like. There may be some questions you will want to ask me later.' Then she went on with her correspondence.

I took the pamphlet over to the window and began to read. It bristled with statistics and at first I thought: 'Oh dear, this is going to be rather a bore — there's no future in *this* sort of stuff.' I even wondered if perhaps it would be better to make a facile excuse and say that I would take it away with me and write to her about it.

Then, suddenly, my eye fell on a sentence which gripped my attention. I forget the exact wording of it, but it concerned the great French steel combine, the Comité des Forges, which it accused of continuing to furnish raw material to Germany, during the course of the First World War. The accusation was made so calmly — almost in the manner of an 'aside' — that it was not till I had read the sentence several times that I realized the nightmare which it revealed. From that moment onwards there was no danger of being bored. As I read, I had a sense of stifling in a jungle of statistics — and they were all statistics of death.

I shut the pamphlet and stared out of the window. 'You look as if you had seen a ghost,' said Dorothy.

'I have. A great many ghosts.'

She smiled. 'I'm glad to think that the pamphlet has had such an effect.'

'Well, you appear to have exposed an international conspiracy to destroy the human race. That's something to get on with.'

She smiled again. 'I think we shall do good work together,' she said.

And I think we did — though whether at that moment it was 'good' work, in any but an abstract sense, to raise a white flag that was to cast its shadow over the whole English-speaking world, is open to question. The historian might well suggest that it would have been better if I had thrown the pamphlet into the waste-paper basket, stalked out of the office and gone



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off to join the Territorials. If I had done so, there would have been no *Cry Havoc!*, none of the frenzied debates, up and down the country, in which the youth of England swore never to fight for King and Country. Thousands of young men in the Dominions where, two years later, the study of my book was made compulsory in the State schools, would have been learning, instead, to use a bayonet.

Yes, it was a very considerable decision I made, at that moment, to bring home to the world the revolting facts which lurked behind the mist of figures in *The Secret International*. It may have been a wrong decision. But I saw no alternative, if I were to keep a shred of self-respect.

### § III

It now became easier to answer the question, 'What is to be done?'

War, it now seemed clear to me, was a racket.

And a racket — journalistically speaking — is a good deal easier to handle than an abstract emotion. You could 'sell' a racket — you could not 'sell' simple human decency.

You could not 'sell' the love of man to Fleet Street — or, for that matter, to the *New York Herald*. You could not say: 'Here are the facts which I believe to be most important in the world . . . will you please print them?' For the facts which I believed to be most important in the world were, to Fleet Street, a howling bore. I believed that it was very important not to hurt people, not to shout at them and bully them, not to whisper cruel things behind them in the shadows. I believed that all men and women were good, that you only had to understand them to make them your friends, that there was no limit to the power of love. I felt this power so intensely that there were moments when I believed it might even be applied to the animals; I used to imagine myself going to the Zoo and cleansing my soul of all fear, all preconceived suspicions, and walking into the lion's cage. I do not need to be told that the picture is ridiculous, as must be the picture of any idealist who

carries his ideals to their logical extreme. But at least it has a 'period' value; in those distant days there were countless young men in their innocence, who thought as I did. Belsen and Dachau were still only spots on the map, rather than stains on the soul of man.

So the first thing to be done was to expose a racket. I had to use my flair for 'readability' in order to give pace and colour to the dry statistics of *The Secret International*. Those statistics were like the bones of a skeleton; nobody had assembled them, let alone breathed life into them. If I was to do that, I would have to go out into the world and see for myself.

This I proceeded to do. And immediately I was brought up against one of the most painful moral dilemmas of my career.

If I were to paint the sort of picture that was needed, a picture to hit the public like a blow between the eyes, it was essential to have a close-up of an armament factory at work. Obviously, the ideal factory would be Vickers, the giant combine which dealt in every weapon of death from small arms to battleships. The headquarters of Vickers was at Barrow-in-Furness, a grim, black patch on the north-west coast, spreading like a rash over a land that had once been beautiful. Barrow was the precise opposite of a tourist resort; visitors were very definitely — and in the light of subsequent events, quite rightly — discouraged, for every visitor at Barrow was a potential spy.

How to obtain entry into Vickers?

When in doubt, it is always best to go to the top. The chairman of Vickers was the late Sir Charles Craven, an ex-naval officer, and a brilliant engineer and organizer. I was fairly well acquainted with one of his closest friends, Sir Robert Horne, whom I had first met when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. So I took up my pen and began to write to Horne.

Then I paused. What could one say? 'Please, Sir Robert, I want to blow Vickers to hell, and since you are such a good friend of Craven's will you kindly help me to do so?' Stripped of all humbug, that was the role demanded, and it was not a role of particular charm.

For several days the letter lay on the desk, unfinished. When-

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ever I tried to get on with it, I threw down my pen, feeling uncomfortable and dirty. Surely, if one had to fight, one could fight clean? And yet, did *they* fight clean? Were there any weapons that one could discard, on grounds of etiquette, in a struggle with these merchants of death? Such were the rhetorical questions that I used to shout aloud, pacing the floor of the study. And when a man begins not only to talk to himself but to talk rhetoric to himself, he is apt to be dangerous. Merchants of death! Today the phrase rings as hollow as a gag in a pre-war pantomime. These 'merchants of death', in Britain at any rate, were brave and honourable men, engaged in a vital service of the State; if their trade was harsh it was dictated by the conditions of the world; it was not they who determined those conditions. However, even to have suggested such an argument to me in those days would have set me raving; for I was in that state of suppressed hysteria which is common, and indeed necessary, to the pure pacifist.

To return to Sir Robert Horne, and the letter which refused to write itself. After a long struggle between my conscience and my sense of social propriety, my conscience won. In other words, I decided that this was one of the occasions on which the only decent thing to do was to behave like a cad.

I little realized how complete a cad I should have to be.

I wrote to Horne, explaining that I was working on a book which would include some scenes in an armament factory, and that for the sake of 'local colour' — (a mild way of describing my passion!) — I should be much obliged if he would use his good offices with Sir Charles Craven to have me shown round Vickers. I made it very clear that I had no wish to bother Craven himself, or indeed to meet him. All I wanted was a few hours' free run of the place, in which to study the trade in its own setting.

Horne replied that he would do his best, adding that for obvious reasons he could make no promises.

Then the first blow fell. As I was going to bed, a few nights later, the telephone rang. It was a long distance call from Barrow-in-Furness. A charming, friendly voice was speaking;

it was Sir Charles himself. He was delighted that I was visiting the factory — how friendly of Robert Horne to suggest it — of course I must stay at his house — he would send a car to meet me — the directors insisted on giving a lunch for me on the following day, etc. etc.

I listened with growing dismay. This was the last thing that I wanted. I had visualized a trip that would be strictly inconspicuous, and as far as possible anonymous, in which I should stay at the local hotel and prowling about in an old suit, avoiding all contact with the 'higher-ups'. The idea of staying as the guest of the chief director was appalling; not only would it limit my opportunities of investigation, but it would put me in an intolerable position. I was old-fashioned enough to think that you should not drink a man's wine when you are preparing to stab him in the back.

However, it was too late to draw back. A few days later, on a wet and windy afternoon, I stepped out of the train at Barrow feeling less like a crusader than a shady commercial traveller.

There was a long, glistening Rolls Royce to meet me; an amiable chauffeur tucked a seal-skin rug over my knees. I felt miserable, and kept muttering to myself: 'Dividends of death — dividends of death!' Which is more than faintly comic in retrospect, but it was not in the least comic at the time. The luxury persisted when we arrived at the house. There were spacious rooms and soft lights and banks of flowers and footmen with cocktails. It is impossible to avoid writing like a housemaid in describing this strange episode in my life; for all these evidences of wealth seemed to me to be evil, to spring from a poisoned source.

There was only one consolation; there was no Sir Charles Craven. By some happy accident he had received an urgent call to London a few hours before I arrived. So I dined in solitary state — and, as a final housemaid touch, there were oysters and there was champagne. If there had also been Sir Charles, with his abundant charm and his ruthless realism, it is quite possible that *Cry Havoc!* would never have been written.

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### § IV

On the following morning I made my tour of the death factory. It is described in Chapter II of *Cry Havoc!* It is an effective piece of journalism, but it is the work of a one-track mind. That is why it *was* so effective. Before my eyes was always the vision of the soldier, the human body that would one day be torn and scarred by the highly polished engines that were paraded before me. When the foreman, pausing in front of a particularly horrible sort of floating mine, said: 'Of course, this is a novelty, so we get a better price for it,' all I thought of was that same human body, somebody's son, floating in the water, turning it red.

Today I should have thought, or tried to think, in terms of sea-power, of the inevitable defence of ancient civilizations, of the necessity of compromise in an imperfect world. In other words, I should have thought as a middle-aged man of the world instead of as a youthful idealist. And probably I should have hoped that we had more of these mines than any other power.

The Vickers episode was only the beginning of a long series of adventures which, for the next six months, were to take me all over Europe in search of material. I went to Geneva, staying with that charming couple the Robert Armstrongs, in the heart of the old city. They had everything which I find most consoling in civilized persons — that is to say, they loved good talk, good wine and bad cats. And certainly, in Geneva, one needed consolation after long days spent in the stifling atmosphere of the Disarmament Conference, where the delegates yawned and stretched and busied themselves, during the most impassioned speeches, by a study of the latest copy of *La Vie Parisienne*, which most of them seemed to carry in their attaché cases. One of the few 'human beings' whom I met in those crowded halls was Madame Litvinoff, the English-born wife of the Russian delegate. We used sometimes to wander by the lake together in the cool of the evening. She was the very last person whom one would associate with a Communist revolution — witty,

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elegant and gay. I suspect that she took her Bolshevism with a grain of salt — or rather, with a spot of Chanel Number 5.

From Geneva I made a vain assault on the Schneider-Creuzot factory, which — far more than Vickers — was the true centre of the armament industry; it was like the heart of a black octopus that stretched from Le Mans to Tokio. It seems, however, that the directors had been warned against the nosey young man who was so interested in their affairs, and they slammed their gates in my face. Undaunted, I went on to Belgium, spending fruitless days trying to obtain admission into the State prisons, where a number of war resisters were undergoing long sentences of solitary confinement.

Meanwhile, whenever I returned to England, it was with the principal object of making a nuisance of myself. I badgered the War Office about the Officers' Training Corps, which seemed to me neither one thing nor the other. The tide of pacifism was rising so quickly that neither the Government nor the public schools dared to admit that the O.T.C.s were merely military institutions; in fact, the headmaster of my old school, Marlborough, said to me: 'The ideal we have in mind is more Platonic than Prussian.' This seemed to me then to be dangerous nonsense — and it still seems so, though for very different reasons. Angrily I wrote:

Behind all this camouflage of Platonism, the true object of an O.T.C. is to teach boys to kill other boys; if it does not do this it is a mere waste of time. It would be far better if the boys took off their heavy tunics, with the tight collars, and the puttees that are the best recipe for varicose veins yet invented, and did a little Morris dancing.

As I have admitted the folly of so many of my statements of this period, I feel justified in suggesting that this one, at least, was, and is, true. When I wrote it, of course, I assumed that the very phrase — 'teaching boys to kill other boys' — was so horrible that the reader would instinctively revolt from it and — in doing so — from the O.T.C.s. Today the phrase seems cheap and cheating. For what is the prepara-

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tion for war but teaching boys to kill other boys? It is not pretty but neither is life; and war, until man is at least a million years further from his father, the ape, will be a permanent condition of life — which is one of a number of reasons for anticipating the early destruction of our planet. However, that is by the way. The only lesson I wish to draw from these dusty files is the lesson that the mask of Plato fits ill over the face of Mars. If we had thought less of Plato and more of Prussia, in the days when I and a million other young men were indulging themselves in hysterics, the peoples of the world might not now be standing in quite such a long queue outside the gates of hell.

### § v

When *Cry Havoc!* came out, it made something of a stir, most of the principal papers, on the day of publication, devoting their leader-pages to it. And the majority of them, significantly, had nothing but praise for its conclusions, which were, of course, uncompromisingly pacific. The two exceptions were Compton MacKenzie in the *Daily Mail* and Yeats-Brown (the Bengal Lancer) in the *Daily Telegraph*. Yeats-Brown afterwards developed his review into a full-length book, entitled *Dogs of War — a Reply to 'Cry Havoc!'*; at the time it infuriated me; today it seems unanswerable.

I mention the book's reception as a reminder of the astonishing change in public opinion which has swept over the British people. The date, remember, was 1933. And across the cover, in bold letters, was the quotation:

Never, in any circumstances, to fight for King and Country.

I had visual proof of the popularity of this theme, a few weeks later, at a great meeting at the Albert Hall, where a packed house cheered to the echo as I called upon them to vote for peace 'even at the price of security, even at the price of honour'. The rhetoric would have been intolerable if it had been merely rhetoric; it was not; always I was haunted by the thought of

the mangled body, the dying soldier — I could see it on the platform beside me.

They made a film of this speech and audiences cheered it all over the country. When I went to see it, in a news-reel theatre, I happened to arrive at the box office at the same time as Noel Coward. 'I've come to hear what you've been up to,' said Noel. 'You won't like it,' I replied. He looked at me grimly. 'I'm quite sure I shan't. That's why I'm here. I've come to hiss.'

If a few more people had hissed, a little longer and a little louder, and above all, a little earlier, the bubble of the great pacific illusion might have been burst before it was too late. But the few hisses were drowned in an almost universal roar of approval. It was like a great army, cheering me on the march. And I had a tragically dim idea of where I was going myself.

In the ranks of this army were some strange creatures, and had I not been hypnotized by the eternal vision of the dying soldier — ('that is the final argument' I used to tell myself, 'that is the only standard of judgment, the physical agony of the individual') — I might have been seriously disturbed by the eccentricity of some of my supporters. After all, one should not lose one's sense of humour even in battle — or, if it comes to that, even in church. (One of the finest passages that ever came from the empurpled pen of the late G. K. Chesterton dwells on the thought of the laughter of Jesus.) And here, in the pacifist army, were figures which were almost too queer to be true.

There was, for example, the singer who, having composed a hymn in favour of peace, enlisted the services of thirty Welsh contraltos, purchased one hundred doves and, armed with those melodious assets, approached me with the suggestion that I should immediately lead them to the more stormy centres of Europe, under the banner of the white flag. The programme, as I recollect it, was that I should deliver a lecture on the importance of peace — (presumably in Polish) — after which the thirty contraltos would sing the hymn — (presumably in Welsh) — and at the end of the hymn the doves would flutter out of the crates, spreading an aroma of peace — (and, one hopes, of nothing else) — over the enraptured audience. I



## THE WHITE FLAG

excused myself from this engagement on the plea that every time we crossed a frontier we should have to obtain a hundred certificates from an international ornithologist to the effect that each dove was free from disease.

There were many more. There were religious cranks, who appeared at the front door in white draperies, waving banners and proclaiming that they had a Message. There were medical cranks, who believed that you could stop man fighting by altering his diet. One day I was startled to receive a cablegram of inordinate length from a Californian lady. It began:

ARRIVING ENGLAND WEDNESDAY NEXT WITH LARGEST BOOK IN  
WORLD MEASURING SIXTEEN FEET ACROSS WHEN FULLY OPENED  
STOP PROPOSE OBTAIN SIGNATURES IN FAVOUR OF PEACE FROM  
EVERY PROMINENT MAN AND WOMAN IN EUROPE BEGINNING WITH  
KING OF ENGLAND STOP KINDLY ARRANGE FOR OPEN TRUCK TO  
TRANSPORT BOOK WITH FULL PUBLICITY FROM SAVOY TO  
BUCKINGHAM PALACE

Today it is to be hoped that such a telegram would send one hurtling out into the street to join the Territorials, pausing *en route* to buy a trumpet, a set of toy soldiers and a Union Jack. In those days it seemed to me — well, rather ridiculous, of course, because I was not utterly drained of humour, though pretty near it — but at the same time rather touching. She had, I felt, the right idea. Her heart was in the right place. I did not laugh at her.

There was, in fact, precious little laughter in the *Cry Havoc!* days. The only person who laughed, and went on laughing, was Herr Hitler. And even he was laughing up his damned sleeve.

## CHAPTER V

### SOME MEN AND SOME FLOWERS

MEANWHILE, up at Glatton, people were beginning to look over the hedge.

For after *Cry Havoc!* I returned with a sigh of relief to the cottage, pushed aside the armament pamphlets and buried my nose in catalogues of seeds and bulbs and flowering shrubs. Winter deepened, stripping the trees to their lovely bones, draping the lattice windows with a lace of frost and sheeting the ruts in the lane with thin panes of ice. (Even if I live to be a hundred I shall find an irresistible pleasure in walking down a frost-bound lane, pausing to tread on the ice in the ruts, and crackle it under my feet. There is a great art in judging the amount of pressure that can be used; a man unlearned in this pastime may tread too hard and find himself ankle deep in yellow water. The most satisfactory ruts, of course, are very shallow, with no water in them; these can be leapt upon with confidence. One feels as though one were jumping through a window, without any of the pain or expense.)

However, if I get going on that subject, I shall never stop. Which was exactly what I said to myself when I began to write *A Thatched Roof*. I found myself jotting down things about the cottage late at night, watching the curious play of shadow on the low ceilings, catching the flicker of the firelight on the face of the Dresden china shepherdess . . . pausing and listening, always listening. No longer did the echo of the guns drift through the wind in the trees; I had done with that for ever; now I could hear all the sweet, muted music that seemed in the past year to have been shut away from me. The more delicate these sounds the more I delighted in them. I would go out and tug the cover from the old well, bend down and listen to the high pizzicato sound of single drops of water striking the silver surface; each time a drop fell I had a vision of a little ghost in the depths below, waiting to celebrate the drop's arrival by

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plucking the string of a phantom violin. The cottage itself was never quite silent, if you had ears to hear; always, late at night, there were tiny brittle sounds of the old beams cracking; they made me think that it was sighing, as it sank, little by little, through the centuries. And always there were the strange sounds of insects and animals. Most townsmen feel that they have passed their apprenticeship when they have learned to distinguish the principal soloists in the eternal oratorio of the birds; I was for subtler things — the miraculous symphony of the bees when one puts one's ear close to the back of the hive on a summer evening, the mysterious subterranean crunch of the mole, faint and far, as he digs beneath the turf when the moon is high.

Oh — this music, [so I wrote] this eternal music of the English country! It is too quiet to be echoed by any human hands, too subtle to be set between staves or disciplined to the rhythms of art, too delicately coloured to be mirrored in any orchestral score. Eternally it sighs, through field and lane, and every hour a new masterpiece is born — a masterpiece in which each echo has its appointed place, and even the pauses — the hushes when the birds are still and the wind has dropped — seem deliberate, ordained and commanded by the baton of the Conductor of all Things.

That was really the origin of *A Thatched Roof* and also of its successor *A Village in a Valley*. They were both forms of thanksgiving, as it were, for the silence, for the retreat of the ghostly guns. All I had to do was to listen, and they 'wrote themselves'. To be quiet, to lie in a lull before the storm, that was all I asked of life.

It was evident, from the reception of these books, that many other people were in a similar mood.

## § II

That is why people began to look over the hedge.

At first I was highly honoured when the front door bell began to ring, and after a flutter of strange voices, my housekeeper entered and said: 'There's two ladies who say they've read your books and please may they look over the garden.' True, I was usually covered in mud, with my pockets full of secateurs, but that, one felt, was what they expected. True again I usually found myself doing the Ruth Draper act, for the garden, like all gardens, was always about to be 'a blaze' or in the process of ceasing to be 'a blaze'; it was never 'a blaze' when people were actually looking at it. All the same, most people professed themselves enchanted — and well they might be, for it was a little bit of heaven, though I say it myself.

After a time, however, as the books reached a wider and wider public, it began to be a bit of a bore. In summer, when it is my habit to go about as nearly nude as decency permits, I would be wandering in the wood, clad in a form of American slips which bear the appropriate trade-name of 'Scandals', when suddenly over the hedge I would see a number of female hats, bobbing up and down and performing the oddest evolutions, owing to the fact that their owners were either trying to jump high enough to see over the top or bend low enough to peer through the gaps. Hastily retreating behind an inadequate euonymus, I would long for the day when the wood really *was* a wood, and when I could disport myself in the bosky shades without any of these embarrassing attentions. However, by now the owners of the hats had seen me, and were already hurrying down the lane to ring the bell and demand admittance. Being of an almost loathesomely amiable nature, I would admit them, having hastily put on a pair of pants over the afore-said 'Scandals'.

We would then make the tour of the garden, and after that the tour of the cottage; and always, at some point in the proceedings, one of them would turn to me, with great archness, and say: 'I'm *sure* you need a housekeeper!' (This word was

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usually pronounced 'hosekeepah', and was accompanied by much darting of the eyes and clasping of the hands.) 'Don't *you* think he needs a hosekeepah, Sylvia dear?'

Sylvia dear, also darting and clasping, was convinced that I needed a hosekeepah.

'Well, you see,' I would say, 'I'm afraid I've already got one.'

'But surely you need a *change*?' they would demand, in shrill tones, which I trusted would not penetrate to the kitchen, where my admirable hosekeepah was preparing tea. 'I mean, it just isn't fair, is it, Sylvia dear? One person having all *this*?'

Sylvia dear was in complete accord. It was not fair. I must have a new hosekeepah, *two* new hosekeepahs . . . and by now we were all in such a state of archness and innuendo that it is a wonder we did not split in two.

'We shouldn't be in the *way*, should we, Sylvia dear?'

No more, I thought, than a couple of elephants in a beehive.

All this, however, is very ungracious. I didn't really mind people looking over the hedge, nor even ringing the bell. I remembered what Meredith once said to Tennyson in similar circumstances. Tennyson had complained, rather pompously, of people who lay in wait to catch a glimpse of him. 'I find it most tedious,' said Tennyson. To which Meredith replied: 'You'd find it even more tedious if they didn't.'

### § III

Something about the cottage seemed to bring out the best in people; even the most urbane and sophisticated of my friends accepted its drawbacks without complaint, grinning cheerfully when they cracked their skulls on its low beams, and making no fuss at all about the spiders in their baths.

I wish I had kept a visitors' book, but I never bothered about such things — though at times a guest would scribble his name on a patch of the whitewashed wall of the study. If he were an artist, as he sometimes was, he would add a little sketch, so that after a while the wall began to look like the page of an illuminated manuscript. Rex Whistler painted some cherubs

floating over the top, and when Lord Berners signed his name he painted another cherub, wearing a coronet. Gerald Berners was as perfect a guest as he was a host; he used to take out his easel into the orchard and paint the cottage in every possible position; and when one went out to see how he was getting on, one would find him apostrophizing the canvas with disarming frankness. 'It's an early Corot.' (Head to the left.) 'No, it's a Daubigny.' (Head to the right.) 'Wait a minute!' (Nose almost on canvas.) 'Damn it — it's a Matthew Smith!' Perhaps there was an element of truth in this criticism. For though Gerald is a bundle of talents, with a versatility which would have been remarkable in any rank of life, his painting, though charming enough, remains the painting of a gifted amateur. It would hardly have been fair if it had had the same distinction as his prose and his music.

Cecil Beaton was another 'sophisticate' — to use an unpleasantly glossy word — who fitted into the cottage as though it had been specially built for him. I can see him now, leaning back with his long legs over the arm of a chair, and can hear the echo of that remarkable voice, half-way between the caw of a rook and the bleat of a lamb — a voice which in most young men would have been a drawback, but which Cecil has somehow turned into an asset, an essential part of his baroque personality.

Cecil, I thought then and think now, has genius, though it is a genius difficult to define. It is the sort of genius that has to be added up. You have to give him ten for this, six for that and nothing for the other. But the tens predominate. He began as a butterfly, fluttering from flower to flower, but choosing his flowers carefully, ignoring the meadowsweet and heading firmly for the cypripediums and the parma violets. In his hand he carried a little camera which he swung like a dandy, as though it were a pair of lorgnettes — and he flashed it in the faces of scores of beautiful women, with results which were always delightful and often significant. The social historian of the inter-war period will find the Beaton albums of photographs an indispensable book of reference.

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And yet I sometimes regret that so much of his time should have been spent with a camera; it might have been better employed with his pencil. He certainly gets ten for that. It is a tiny, quivering pencil, as delicate as a seismograph, registering not earthquakes, but storms in teacups — always provided that the teacups are of the most precious Sèvres. He gets ten, too, for his sense of colour — for the stage sets in which he wages battle between scarlet and magenta and declares peace with mauve. And for his all too rare prose, which is swift and taut, even though — I understand — the effort of writing is an agony for him.

Most of all, he gets ten for guts. He did a good job in the war. The butterfly, like quite a number of other butterflies, fluttered very near to the cannon's mouth.

Not only did the visitors to the cottage show themselves at their best and their happiest — they also showed themselves at their most typical. I am thinking in particular, at the moment, of John Gielgud. Never did I realize, till he came to stay at Glatton, how completely a great actor could be enshrouded in his art, how utterly the footlights could shut out the light of day. I do not mean that he crouched indoors or spouted blank verse at dinner; on the contrary, he was as natural as a ploughboy, though not perhaps as knowledgeable, for when he helped to weed the herbaceous border he gaily pulled up a large clump of ixi<sup>a</sup>s under the illusion that they were grass. He was only 'withdrawn' in the sense that he was apparently totally unaware of what was going on in the outside world. His visit happened to coincide with a period of more than usually acute crisis in the international sphere; I cannot remember who was up to what, whether it was Hitler or Mussolini or Franco or all three at once; whatever it was, all the rest of us were nervy and apprehensive, and went to bed on the Saturday night wondering if we should be at war in the morning.

The radio had broken down, and to learn the worst we had to wait for the morning papers. John, who appeared to be as anxious as any of us to see them, strolled up the lane to waylay the paper boy. A few minutes later he came hurrying back, frowning gloomily, the paper tucked under his arm.

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‘What is it? What has happened?’

He gave a snort of disgust. And in tones that Macbeth might well have flung to the ramparts he cried: ‘Jimmy Agate’s given Edith the most *stinking* notice!’

And that, I hasten to add, was not a pose. The headlines, the alarums and excursions of the day had passed him by. His mind had never left the theatre. I have often thought that of all the gifts that one might pray for, if one could be born again, this would be the first — this sublime capacity for living in one’s art, self-contained, master of a kingdom of make-believe.

### § I V

Of all who stayed at the cottage, none was more revealing than Hugh Walpole.

I had known Hugh for years, and it is a tribute to his generous nature that we remained friends, for I had written the most irreverent things about him. Not that I despised his talents, which were outstanding. (Though he was nearly always praised for the wrong things. Those long, stodgy sagas, like an indigestible *rechauffé* of Walter Scott, were reverently acclaimed by the critics when, by rights, they should have been blown to blazes. On the other hand, he received less than his deserts for his essays in the macabre, like *The Silver Mask*. In these he had a vision as keen and a touch as sure as de Maupassant — even the de Maupassant of *Le Horla*.)

It was not through any lack of literary appreciation that I had aimed darts at Hugh — and am, apparently, still aiming them. It was rather that there was something in his personality and his position that brought out the sadist in one. (I am by no means the only writer who has had this feeling.) He was a solid success — with the accent on the ‘solid’. He produced large quantities of solid novels, with solid sales; he had achieved a knighthood, and was standing solidly at the top of the literary staircase, receiving newcomers with a solid hand-clasp, whether they liked it or not. To the irreverent, such a figure offered an irresistible temptation. Secondly, it was suspected that behind



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this solid façade there were all sorts of queer goings-on — (in a strictly cerebral sense). If only one could peep behind the curtain of his mind — that thick curtain of red plush before which he posed, in the attitude of a Victorian statue — people said that one would see the strangest creatures creeping about in the murk, creatures that gibbered and squinted and behaved in a manner altogether unbecoming to their master, who, after all, was Chairman of the Book Society.

On no other assumption could one explain the many passages in his books in which he lingered, with such palpable pleasure, over scenes of the most twisted cruelty.

I had my own opinion on these theories, but it was none of my business to explore them. It was Hugh himself who introduced the subject, one night when he was staying at the cottage. We had both taken rather a lot to drink, the garden was drenched in the perfume of syringa, the moon was high; in fact, it was a moment for unbosoming.

He said: 'I simply *cannot* understand why the critics are always accusing me of having this morbid streak. Can you? Do I *look* a morbid type?'

It was easy enough to shake one's head at that. Sitting there, in the deck chair, with his legs crossed and his hands clasped over his ample stomach, he looked like a suffragan bishop, or a very hearty schoolmaster, who might at any moment enrich the occasion with a Latin tag.

'What *is* it?' he demanded. 'Why do they say all these hateful things?'

'Well, Hugh . . .' I replied, thinking of his *Man with Red Hair*, 'if you *will* write books about a lot of naked old gentlemen on a roof, being tied up to posts and slashed with razors. . . .'

'Really!' He looked as if he was going to explode. Suddenly he began to chuckle. 'I suppose it *was* a bit much. But I had to do it. If they're in you, these things will come out.' Then — rather mischievously — 'Did you like that part?'

'I couldn't have liked it more. But, as you say, it was a bit much. And so was *The Old Ladies*. And so were some of the beating scenes in the early books.'

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'Oh, I *know*,' he interrupted. 'I suppose it does sound queer if you add them all up. It's just . . . it's just something inside me.' He sighed. 'All the same, why should I be identified with my characters? Do *you* think I'm like that?'

To tell the truth, I did. And I was longing to ask which type of character Hugh really was. Was he one of the old gentlemen tied up to the posts? Or was he the one who went rushing round with the razor? I rather suspected the former, but I could think of no polite way of making such a suggestion.

'And then there's Willie,' he said. 'What could I possibly have done to deserve that shattering onslaught?'

He was referring, of course, to William Somerset Maugham, whose *Cakes and Ale*, with its brilliantly malicious parody of Hugh, had only recently appeared.

'I wouldn't worry about that,' I said. 'After all, it's rather a compliment.'

'It's the sort of compliment I could very well dispense with,' he snorted. 'It hurt me very bitterly. I've racked my brain to think how I could conceivably have given Willie any cause for offence. . . .'

Hugh's only cause of offence, needless to say, was his existence. To a writer of Maugham's satiric quality — and ruthlessness of character — he cried aloud to be caricatured.

We dropped the subject, and went in to play 'Hearts' with Harold.

This cryptic phrase demands a moment's explanation.

Harold was Hugh's chauffeur. I had not met him till that afternoon, when I saw him sitting at the wheel of Hugh's immense Daimler. He was about forty, and he was one of the solidest men I have ever seen — thick-set, with huge shoulders, vast hands and a big, ruddy face. He looked like an expoliceman, and that, I believe, had been his profession when Hugh first met him. He appeared to be a very nice chap, so I shook hands with him, showed him where to leave the car, and told him that my housekeeper would take him to his room, which was a pretty little place just over the kitchen.

'Where is Harold?' said Hugh, when I returned. I told him.

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'Oh dear!' he exclaimed. 'I don't think Harold would like *that*.'

I protested, somewhat warmly, that it was a charming room.

'Yes, I'm sure. But Harold doesn't like being alone.'

'He won't be alone. There's my gardener and his wife. And a very pretty girl who comes in to wash up.'

Hugh still looked rather peevish. But all he said was: 'Oh, very well. Only, after dinner, do you mind if he comes in and plays "Hearts"?''

'I don't mind if he comes in and plays the trombone. Only what is — or are — hearts?'

'Hearts', it seemed, was Harold's favourite game. And later on that evening, when he came in and seated himself like a colossus in the tiny, low-ceilinged room, and gripped the cards in his gigantic hands, and dealt them out as if they were paving stones, with immense solemnity, I was enchanted with the whole business. It was the sort of occasion which I richly enjoy, even though 'Hearts', on closer acquaintance, seemed to me to be practically indistinguishable from 'Snap'. However, a good time was had by all. Hugh beamed and expanded; his well-stocked mind produced a fund of agreeable anecdotes; Harold, saying practically nothing, but breathing with remarkable solidity, concentrated on the intricacies of the game; the scent of syringa mingled agreeably with the fumes of port, and — for the time being — the leprechauns, the squinting ones, the gibberers, seemed far away.

Since then I have often pondered on that little scene, and now — at a distance — its significance is easier to appreciate. I believe that Harold was, to Hugh, a symbol of everything that was normal in life, everything that was sunlit and strong and ordinary. Harold, most evidently, was not troubled by 'things that go bump in the night'. And when Hugh felt these slimy creatures twitching at the curtain of his mind, he had only to look at Harold's calm and open countenance for them to be sent scurrying back into the dark.

But sometimes Harold must have looked the other way, and when the creatures came out and disported themselves on the open page, for all to see.

## § v

All these encounters seem to have taken place centuries ago. Surely it was in the dim distant past that I walked with Rebecca West over the ploughed fields, listening to the most enchanting conversations that can ever have drifted from the lips of a woman — an epigram in every rut? Surely it was in the Victorian era that I watched Oliver Messel chasing sheets of drawing paper through a cowslip field in a high wind, paper on which was scribbled the first draft of the designs which he was making for Hollywood's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

Surely fifty years have passed since Melba sang there, in a moonlit orchard, or since, on a summer evening, I waved goodbye to a young honeymoon couple to whom I had lent this perfect place for a week of lilac time?

In fact, little more than a decade has passed since I said goodbye to the cottage. But in that period a great many things have happened to the world. And at this time, a great many things were beginning to happen to me. They had nothing to do with work, or money or people. They were much more exciting than that.

## CHAPTER VI

### WHO LOVETH BEST

He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things both great and small.

COLERIDGE

‘**B**LOSSOM by blossom the spring begins . . .’ that is true of the life of the soul as well as of the life of the garden. It describes the putting forth of spiritual leaves, the filtering of light through the dark undergrowth of the ego.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that in the garden I should begin, at long last, to ask myself what lay behind all this beauty. I may have given the impression that the cottage was a rather rackety sort of place; that was not so; nine out of ten days I was alone. And when the guests were gone and I had the flowers to myself, I was so happy that I wondered why at the same time I was haunted by a sense of emptiness. It was as though I wanted to thank somebody, but had nobody to thank; which is another way of saying that I felt the need for worship. That is, perhaps, the kindest way in which a man may come to his God. There is an interminable literature on the origins of the religious impulse; some scholars have proved, to their own satisfaction, that it is only a sublimation of the sexual instinct, others have found that it springs from the tangled roots of fear. To me it is simpler than that; it is summed up in the image of a man at sundown, watching the crimson flowering of the sky and saying — to somebody — ‘Thank you’.

All this, however, I had to learn. For too many years I had been content to live on the surface. During the early years my spiritual development — if you can call it such — had followed a familiar pattern. There were the usual adolescent stirrings coinciding with the first communion, the first heady sniff of incense, whose fragrance still lingered about me when I slipped off the black coat of Marlborough for the Norfolk jacket of Oxford. At Balliol I had flirted with the idea of ‘going over to Rome’; but the flirtation was of the feeblest; and soon the rosary

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was pushed to the back of the drawer, and *The Light of the World* was replaced by a drawing by Picasso.

I had made something of a parade of this newly found 'emancipation'. When success was beginning to come my way, I published a self-portrait proclaiming the futility of faith.<sup>1</sup> I wrote:

Faith is a musty, lipping word to me. It is no more a virtue than an ear for music; you either have it or you don't. I have faith only in a few human relationships, and in my own capacity for appreciating beautiful things. My lack of faith in any religious creed is neither clever nor stupid; it is merely unfortunate.

I believe that when I die I am snuffed out like a candle, and that no god will ever again set me alight. I see no use in trying to cheat myself. I long to believe in an 'after-life'; I long to think that the shadows which even now are slowly lengthening over the lawns of life will, when the night comes, be chased away by some as yet unrisen moon. But I cannot. All my searching, my questioning, my endeavour, lead me nowhere.

You may call that a tragedy. You may say: 'If you and the rest of your generation feel that the world is futile, you have no part in it. You will not fight its battles nor sing its songs.'

That argument is quite wrong. The fact that I do not believe in a cause does not prevent me from dying for it. Though the road leads nowhere, one marches on — there are so many bright sights to be seen and brave sallies to be made *en route*.

*Futility, you see, can be great fun. . . .*

There would be little point in quoting so jejune a proclamation were it not such a perfect illustration of the theme of *The Hound of Heaven*. Never was there such a fleeing down the nights and down the days.

<sup>1</sup> This is included in *Are They the Same at Home?* published by Jonathan Cape (1927).

## WHO LOVETH BEST

But all the time I was unhappy about it; there was always this queer feeling of wanting to thank somebody who was not there. After an evening of great music, after a day in which I had been moved by great art, I was restless and on edge — the echoes turning sour within me, the lines becoming blurred. You could not thank the dead — Mozart was out of hearing, Piero della Francesca had left no address. It was from a thwarted religious impulse that in those days I so often found myself denying what I secretly longed to affirm, celebrating the discord of the world when I should have been more happily acclaiming its harmony.

However, if a man — even a journalist! — has kindness in his heart, he will have a natural reluctance to give pain. I have always had a good deal more heart than head, and as my correspondence widened to the proportions of a ‘fan-mail’, I gradually awoke to the fact that this constant hammering on the theme of Futility — with God in the background as the arch-lunatic, and a great many subsidiary *motifs* supplied by the more lyrical exponents of blasphemy, from Shelley to Swinburne — was giving a great deal of pain to a great many people. They may have been unimportant people; they may have been only poor old women in provincial towns, if such are ‘unimportant’ — but I was making them unhappy. And one day I opened, at the breakfast table, a letter which was like a knife in the heart. Here it is:

Dear Beverley Nichols: I once read an essay by Mr. Chesterton in which he said that the world’s greatest crime was to destroy a child’s toy. I have only just realized what he meant and it is you who have taught me. I had a toy and it was called Faith. I had played with it for nearly eighty years. And now you have broken it.

I do not know whether I should thank you or curse you.

But I had thought to die like a child, with my toy in my arms, and now I shall die like a foolish old woman, and my arms will be empty.

Of all the thousands of letters from strangers which I have

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ever received, kindly, critical, abusive, none has ever affected me so deeply as that; it was tantamount to an accusation of murder; it haunted me. Had it been possible to trace the writer, I would have tried to make amends, but she was only a voice crying in the darkness. From that moment I swore that whatever my own poor views on the great mysteries of life and the hereafter, I would keep them to myself — at least until such time as I could look up to the sky without an expression of cheap scorn on my face.

### § I I

There began a curious interlude in which, always shunning any form of Christian orthodoxy, I explored the by-ways and side-alleys of religion. Looking back on it all it seems to me very strange that I should so persistently have evaded the obvious solution, which was to walk through the open door of a church. Perhaps the refusal to do this was partly due to a perverted form of honesty. I had my own Areopagitica of faith; I could not praise a fugitive and cloistered creed, that never sallied out to meet its adversaries. I was too proud to accept a gift merely because I wanted it; and for me, Faith meant literal Faith in the historical accuracy of the gospel story. And that I was totally unable to accept.

So there began a number of experiments which always ended in blankness and frustration. One of them, perhaps, is worthy of mention. It concerns my initiation into the mysteries of spiritualism. Like most smart young men I had jeered at the spiritualists; no movement lends itself more easily to ridicule and misrepresentation, though the mockers usually end up by looking more foolish than the mocked.<sup>1</sup> However, I thought that it would at least be worth going to see what it was all about.

It happened that an old friend of mine, Dennis Bradley, had

<sup>1</sup> Even after the beginning of the war I had a fierce battle with the whole spiritualist movement, on the grounds that its guides had consistently and unanimously affirmed that no war would take place at all. However, on this occasion my motives were very different; I was animated by regret that the forces of the movement had been diverted to false purposes — the purposes of prophecy which is obviously beyond its province.



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staying with him one of the world's greatest mediums, the famous Valiantin. He rang me up and asked me to come to a séance. I went along, in a somewhat gay and flippant mood, which was enhanced by an admirable dinner. When we went into the tiny room where the séance was to be held, I thought: 'This is going to be a first-class joke. Let's hope that somebody turns up the lights in the middle of it all and finds Valiantin surrounded by yards of cheese-cloth.'

What happened was very different. There were about eight of us, seated in a circle. I forget the names of most of them, but on my right was the journalist Hannen Swaffer, and on my left was Mr. Justice McCarthy, with Valiantin next to him. (Valiantin, by the way, was tied hand and foot.) Before we began, Dennis Bradley got up and turned on the gramophone. It was a record of Clara Butt singing 'Abide with Me', and though this should perhaps have induced soberer feelings, it had the opposite effect on me. I began to feel giggly.

They turned off the lights. In the middle of the room was a luminous trumpet, which immediately rose and floated in mid-air. I remember thinking that this was pretty clever; it seemed obvious that Valiantin must, somehow or other, have untied himself in record time. I also remember feeling puzzled by the extraordinary quality of the voice which came from the trumpet; it was high and shrill and it seemed difficult to associate with any of the people in the room. However, I dismissed this as a parlour trick, particularly as the voice seemed to be talking gibberish.

There was a lull. Then suddenly, the trumpet pointed to me, and my name was called. I sat up sharply, for two reasons, firstly because Valiantin, had used a nickname which could not have been known to anybody else present, and secondly because the voice itself was a living echo of the voice of a very intimate friend who had committed suicide in tragic circumstances six weeks before. I had not been thinking of him, but the combination of the nickname — which he had invented — and the curious quality of the tone in which it was delivered, brought him irresistibly before me.

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I said — not unnaturally — ‘Who’s that?’

Before the voice had time to reply, Hannen Swaffer interposed: ‘You mustn’t ask “Who’s that?” You must say “Welcome, Friend!”’

I turned to Swaffer with some impatience. ‘Really! I couldn’t possibly say anything so pompous as “Welcome Friend!” to anybody, dead or alive.’ And once again I asked: ‘Who’s that?’

At which precise moment I passed out. I can just remember slipping to the floor in a heap, being dragged from the room and laid on the staircase. After that, the next thing I remember, about an hour later, is a glass of brandy at my lips and a hot towel on my forehead. The only other physical detail of any interest is that twenty-four hours later, when for the first time I got out of the bed to which I had been dispatched, I looked in the glass and saw that my face was still the colour of chalk. And that was in no way due to fright — though I should not be in the least ashamed of admitting to extreme terror. Oddly enough, I had not been frightened, only interested.

It is not much of a story. But it is enough to show why, from that time onwards, I gave spiritualism a wide berth. It looked as though the spirits did not like me — or maybe they liked me too much.

It would be unprofitable to follow my other efforts to find a faith, which were sporadic and unselective, and filled my bookshelves with a miscellany of volumes beginning with the *Bhagavat Ghita* and ending with Zweig’s *Mental Healers*. Any help that I may have found in these creeds was only transitory. It was not till I came to the garden that at last I stumbled into the narrow twisting path that leads to the truth.

### § III

I am going to say something which I have said before and shall probably say again — something so simple that many people may not think it worth saying at all.

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It is merely that I do not see how a man can be at once a good gardener and a good atheist.

To look into the heart of a rose, to praise its beauty, and in the next breath to proclaim that the universe is a senseless chaos is surely the most naked example of a contradiction in terms; it is a blatant assertion that the part is greater than the whole. 'All right,' you may tell me, 'we know all about *that* old argument; we've all read our Paley's *Evidences*.' Perhaps you have, but it was not through any book that I first realized the immense truths of the 'argument from design'; I learnt it from the flowers. If that statement sounds absurdly trite, I cannot help it. The gradual discovery, in flower upon lovely flower, of the most exquisite and intricate patterns, had for me the quality of a religious revelation. Like most young men of sensitivity, I had taken pleasure in flowers, but I had never really *looked* at them — never been alone with them, in the clear morning or the still night, never stood before them, and stared and stared, and bent nearer, and touched them, very gently, and stepped back again, with the feeling that they had somehow entered into my spirit.

I bought a magnifying glass, and late at night, in the lamp-light, I would hold it over a single narcissus, and note with rapture how the petals were transformed into snowy plains where, in a Lilliputian sense, one could wander at will. I bent low over the daisy, with its thousands of close-packed stars, each crowned by a master-craftsman with a tip of gold. I revelled in the rich fabrics of the iris, every petal a tapestry in miniature, painted with a delicacy which filled the soul with awe.

The commonest objects were among the most exciting — the exquisite disposition of the seed-pods on the underside of a fern, like little buttons sewn on some miraculous jerkin, the tousled heads of dandelions, the bold sweep of a blade of grass, cut more cleanly, more surely, than any man-made sword. Life, as I made these discoveries, was one long catching of the breath. It became an increasing agony to leave my garden and return to London — I longed for its little hedges to grow higher and higher, to shut out the ugly world for ever.

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And while the sense of sight was persuading me of — at any rate — the possibility of a divine pattern, so the sense of sound was suggesting to me the possibility of a universal rhythm. The very air around me was vibrant with music — the lovely legato phrases of the wind in the wheat, the brilliant pianistic arpeggios of a rainstorm, the rise and fall of the fluting birds. How was it possible, with all this music, poured out so ceaselessly, that there should not be a major melody and a master musician? These questions I would ask myself on my lonely walks over the hills, and sometimes, on these walks, I would wander into one of the little churches that are dotted all over that part of Huntingdonshire, and sit in an old wooden pew at the back, feeling an extraordinary happiness steal over me. How quiet it was — even the bird-song that drifted through the open porch seemed to come from a far distance! And yet, though one was utterly alone, one did not feel lonely. Here, maybe, one might find what I had for so long been seeking — somebody to thank.

It was after one of these walks that I came home and read again, for the first time in years, the gospel according to St. Mark. As the sublime story unfolded itself, I kept whispering to myself — ‘If only it were true — if only it were true!’ And then, suddenly, I realized that I had never made any serious effort to find out whether it was true or whether it was not. I had based my conviction on a cheap and facile assumption — the assumption that miracles did not happen, although I was at that very moment surrounded by miracles, from the flowers on my desk to the ghostly bouquet of shadows that they cast on the wall. To the historical basis of a story that had held a large part of the civilized world for two thousand years, a story which was for all men a matter of life or death, I had given less attention than to the study of a company report. It was, to say the least of it, not very intelligent.

There and then I decided that before I did anything else I would re-educate myself, going back to the beginning, and doing a little honest theological research. On the following day I went down to London, and came back with a suitcase full of books. The next few months were among the most exciting I

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have ever known, for though they were mostly spent at my desk, they were really a treasure hunt — a hunt through history, and the prize at the end was Faith.

I do not propose to write at length about the historical evidence for Christianity; anything I may have to say of any value has already been published in *The Fool Hath Said*.

One thing, however, I do most earnestly entreat. If any reader of this book should find himself in the same mental condition as I was before I began these studies, if he should be one of those who assume that the Christian account of the facts is 'impossible', that it just couldn't have happened, that it is against nature and utterly contrary to 'enlightened opinion' — if, in short, he thinks that it is just a pretty story, to be set aside by side with the legends of Father Christmas and Jack and the Beanstalk — I do implore him, in his own most vital interests, to think again, to do some research, to examine those facts as coldly and impartially as if he were a member of a jury. Even if he gains nothing else he will have made the discovery that theology is one of the most exciting studies to which a man may devote himself, a study beside which the wildest thriller seems tame and flat. But I suspect that this will be the least of his gains. I suspect that he will find, to his astonishment, that 'it might have happened'.

That is, of course, the first step. Christianity is not a man-made system, like Communism, which can be assessed in a court of law. For its mystical fulfilment it demands from its followers a leap in the dark. (So, for that matter, does Communism, the only difference being that in Communism the leap is from darkness to deeper darkness, whereas in Christianity the leap is from darkness to light.)

How I took that leap in the dark, once again, need not concern us. Having taken it, I felt the urgent need to tell others about it. That meant another book. It was to prove the hardest book I have ever written — not only because I was presuming to engage in arguments which had claimed the attention of the greatest scholars of all time, but because, with my past record, I was obviously inviting a good deal of ridicule and mis-

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representation from my friends. Some of them, it is true, had 'gone over to Rome', but I always felt that these people joined the Roman Catholic Church as though they were joining a new club; they seemed to have studied the members' list rather too carefully. There was a dreadfully social, old-school-tie atmosphere about their conversion. There was certainly no evidence of any impelling need, on their part, to testify to their convictions.

I decided to put myself to the hardest possible test. Instead of writing the book in the cottage, where simple faith flowered as naturally as the primroses in the hedgerow, and where, hour by hour, my pen would move to the distant chime of bells from the old church tower, I arranged to leave all this, and to go, quite deliberately, to the noisiest, craziest and most unashamedly pagan part of the world I could find. At first I thought it would be New York, but I decided against that because it seemed too simple and too obvious. Some of those high apartments that look out over the city might have been designed, especially at twilight, for religious contemplation. It would be only too easy to turn a room on the thirty-second floor into a monastic cell. I wanted contrasts that were closer, lustier and more dangerous.

In the end I chose the Riviera — not the Riviera which I love, not the tiny fishing ports nor the mountain villages, but Cannes in the height of the season, and the very centre of it, the Martinez Hotel. I chose it because the jazz bands would be playing under my window till late at night, because the corridors would be full of friends dragging me this way and that, and because always there would be the ultimate allurements of the sea. If I could stand up to all this, and keep the same integrity of purpose, I should not have many qualms about the future.

So I went down, and booked one of the noisiest rooms in the hotel, looking out on to the promenade. And as soon as I had unpacked my books — (there was a trunk full of works of theology, on which I had to pay excess!) — I sat down to write.

Never, surely, can any religious work have been written in more incongruous surroundings. As I looked up from my desk

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I could see, through the open window, the gay promenade, and beyond it the beach, with its butterfly parasols and the bronze ballet of the bathers. In an eternal blaze of sunshine, and against a rigid backcloth of blue, pirouetted Europe's chorus of cosmopolitans, delicately depraved, among whom I had many friends. And there I was, sweating at my desk, wrestling with the inconsistencies in the gospel according to St. John.

Sometimes one of the chorus would look up to the window, and wave. 'They' were aware that I had arrived and that I was writing a book, and 'they' were sure that it would be delicious, and who was 'in it' this time? In a rash moment I had said, 'You're *all* in it?' So the members of the chorus were more than ever persistent in their efforts to drag me into their revels. And now and then a boy or a girl would run up to the window, tanned, naked, supremely physical, and plead with me: 'You *can't* go on at that old book — Elsa's giving a party and you're *insane* not to come.' I had to shake my head, and bury myself, once more, in Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*.

Often I said to myself: 'This is grotesque, farcical. It is a situation in a revue. You must go away, up into the mountains. Religious revelations do not come to you in an air that is impregnated with Chanel Number 5. You can't see God in a vitrine displaying scarves by Schiaparelli. And you certainly can't hear the still voice of the spirit against the rhythmical beat of 'Night and Day' — which melody, in those apocryphal days, was drifting all over the earth, and seemed likely to twine itself around the stars.

All the same, I stuck it — week after week.

I was glad to finish the first part of *The Fool Hath Said*. For though the argument was of intense fascination — being no less than a strictly objective examination into the historical evidences for the truth of the Christian legend, and though, as I stumbled down this well-worn path, in the footsteps of a thousand scholars, the road seemed to grow wider and brighter, step by step, till it led to the very foot of the Cross — yet, unversed as I was in theology and unpractised in the compila-

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ion of history, it was an exhausting business. It called for long days and nights of acute concentration, and it could not have been sustained without the help of prayer.

It was with a sigh of relief that I began the second half, which was the application of this faith, reinforced by the evidence of history, to the practical problems of the individual in the modern age. Here, it seemed all would be plain sailing.

I decided to finish the book in my cottage. I had been away too long from the garden. It was late September, the loveliest time of the year was upon us; through the first fallen leaves in the orchard the autumn crocuses would be lifting their purple pears, and in the border the roses would be coming to their second flowering, which always seems more tender and more precious than their first — perhaps because, on some mornings, their petals have been bruised by the silver scissors of the frost.

I packed the manuscripts, paid the bill, and on the last evening went for a first and last look at the Casino. It was an odd experience. The crowded gambling rooms seemed to be filled with ghosts, weaving backwards and forwards, with transparent faces and jerking hands, through drifts of heliotrope tobacco smoke. It was not that the gamblers seemed wicked or depraved; even in this moment of spiritual exaltation I was, I suppose, free from the emotions of the prig. It was simply that they were not *there*; they were really not alive, and they certainly were not happy.

But I . . . I was very much alive, and I was very happy indeed.

If I had known what was just around the corner I might have felt less certain of this happiness.



## CHAPTER VII

### SALVATION IS STREAMLINED

‘JUST around the corner’, as I hinted in the last chapter, lay something which was to be the cause of great distress. That ‘something’ was the Oxford Group.

My name has been so frequently and so publicly linked with this remarkable body and its streamlined evangelism that it may seem late in the day to deny the association; nor do I wish to deny it, if by doing so I would give pain to those Christians — and there are many — who consider that their faith has been strengthened by their discovery of Buchmanism.

The fact remains that only twice have I spoken with Doctor Buchman, and then we exchanged trivialities. He was transparently sincere; he obviously sought nothing for himself; and yet I could not feel at ease with him. He was so slick and starched and glossy that he suggested an American dentist; one felt that he was always on the point of saying ‘Open wide!’ (In one sense that is precisely what he does say, when he urges the desirability of public confession.)

For me, Doctor Buchman drove the final nail into his own coffin by his reply to a certain American reporter who had asked him how the members of the Group always managed to live in such luxury — an unfair question, by the way, because many of them live very simply indeed. Buchman flashed his teeth at his questioner and retorted: ‘Isn’t God a millionaire?’ If it is possible to concentrate more vulgarity into four words, it would be interesting to know how.

And yet, I had some real friends in the Group — though they have since given me up as a bad job; I attended several of their ‘house parties’ and at the first encounter the effect they made was so overwhelming that I incorporated a hurried and ecstatic chapter on them in *The Fool Hath Said*. They caught me at what is known as a ‘psychological moment’ — a foolish expression, for all moments in life are psychological moments. I was rest-

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less; the book was hanging fire; some of the first flush of excitement was fading. In such a mood, at a party, I met a young man who was a 'Grouper'. We will call him Smith.

Smith said: 'You must come to Oxford. There is an international meeting of the Group. It will be a revelation to you.'

It was. Oxford was packed with young men and women from all nations; there must have been thousands of them — all gathered together in the name of Christ, to testify to the reality of the 'change' in their lives, to carry through the world four radiant banners emblazoned with the slogans:

ABSOLUTE HONESTY

ABSOLUTE PURITY

ABSOLUTE UNSELFISHNESS

ABSOLUTE LOVE

The cafés were crowded with Groupers, the High Street seemed afire with shining faces, and as the *comble* of the festivities there was a giant meeting at which, under arc lights, young men and women from every walk of life, came forward to offer themselves in the service of Our Lord.

I was swept in. It was heady stuff. I did not realize, at the time, how carefully staged it all was, how these apparent neophytes from the factories, the services, the stage, were actually engaged in putting on an act that was very well rehearsed. I am not suggesting that they did not believe in it, nor that they were animated by any other emotion than pure evangelism, but there is a difference between a spontaneous confession and one that is made twice nightly. Perhaps this is cavilling, for obviously, if you try to apply the technique of modern salesmanship to the teaching of Our Lord, you must borrow some of the tricks of the music hall.

Public confession was Doctor Buchman's trump drawing card, and he was shrewd enough to play it with great skill. (The Groupers call it 'sharing'). I must have been exceptionally simple to have been so impressed by this farce. I listened enthralled to dozens of these confessions, some from women, some from men, all pouring out their souls on public platforms,

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beating their breasts and crying *mea culpa* — and I thought: 'How noble of them, how selfless, how cleansing to their souls!' Never once did it occur to me that they were not really pouring out their souls at all, that they were not 'coming clean'.

For there was one little subject that was scarcely ever mentioned in these revelations, and that was sex.

Sex — by which I mean the real stuff, raw and naked, with all of nature's arrogant obscenity — might never have troubled these people at all. They dilated at length on other shortcomings; they had been unkind to their sisters, or rude to their servants, or sharp with their tradesmen. One young man admitted that when he was a boy he had stolen a ten-shilling note, and several owned up to cheating in exams — though I noted that the exams were usually unimportant and at a convenient distance of time.

But nobody, male or female, ever stood up and confessed to visiting a brothel, or committing adultery or even to romping too vigorously at school. One pimply young man stammered out that he had had some peculiar sensations during a recent visit to the Folies Bergères, but just when he was getting to what appeared to be the point, Doctor Buchman rang the bell and up popped a bright young Welsh miner who floated us away on a tide of high falutin stuff about the new spirit in the heart of the working man.

Dr. Buchman, of course, *had* to ring the bell; if he had not done so, if he had allowed men and women to draw the curtain which veiled their real selves from the world, the meetings would have been closed by the police. This very fact robbed the confessions of any value.

The sexual question was the occasion for the first cold glimmer of reason which pierced the rosy mist of my visit to Oxford.

One night I decided that the time had come for me to 'share' myself. I had been dining with a number of the Groupers in the hall of one of the colleges. After dinner there was a brief meeting and some prayers, and then we split up into twos and threes, wandered about the gardens and talked. This was a

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recognized hour for 'sharing'; the combination of a good dinner, a summer moon and a quantity of discreet and ancient cedar trees were calculated to loosen the strings of the heart if of nothing else.

So I decided to get it over. The decision was made with no pleasurable anticipation; it was strongly against my natural inclinations; but I was so captivated by the Buchman technique that it seemed the only thing to do. I would tell all.

My confidante was a dark, attractive girl who had been sitting opposite to me at dinner. She was ideal for the purpose; she was — or so it seemed — *du monde*; she claimed a fervent admiration for the works of Mr. Aldous Huxley — though she had added that it was such a pity that he was not 'changed'; she even let loose a tripping allusion to the Marquis de Sade. To one with such a broad outlook, I felt, my own sexual shortcomings would be very small beer.

So I said to her: 'I'd like to talk to you.' She said: 'Of course,' and linked her arm in mine. Together we strolled over to the shade of the nearest unoccupied cedar tree.

We sat down and I said to her: 'If you don't mind, I'd rather turn my back while I tell you this. Some of it will be difficult.'

Again she said: 'Of course.' And then she added, very brightly, 'It's always difficult.'

'Good!' I thought. 'She's had it before. She won't be shocked. And anyway — even if she *is* — that's the whole point of the thing. If what one says is not shocking, it's obviously not true. So here goes. . . .'

And I began, speaking softly into the shadows, my hands clasped over my knees. You need not tell me that the whole scene is farcical. But at that moment it did not seem so; it seemed a part, and a beautiful part, of the Divine Comedy.

I shut my eyes; I was searching for the truth, however shameful. And then, suddenly behind me, I heard a gasp. I paid no attention, and went on talking. The gasp was followed by a high-pitched 'Oh! *Really!*' There was a rustle as she sprang to her feet, and by the time that I had turned round all that was left of her was a slim shadow, fleeing in horror across the lawn.

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I saw her later that night, looking very pale, and drifting about in corners. I tried to talk to her, feeling that perhaps I ought to apologize — though why one Buchmanite should apologize to another Buchmanite for carrying the principle of 'absolute honesty' to its logical conclusion, I really do not know. But she shot away like a frightened deer, and among her friends there was a great pursing of lips and darting of eyes.

So much for one man's attempt to tell the truth, which really was not so very awful, between ourselves. It was an illuminating experience. It is not to be recommended, either for the comfort of the individual or for the peace of the world.

But even this fiasco was not enough to put me off. I went down from Oxford determined to carry the message of the Group to the world. The story of my gradual disillusionment would be either painful or tedious, and probably both, though I have thought it worth while to recount, in a later chapter, the episode which led to my final break with them. In the meantime, it is enough to say that the mood of exaltation in which I had finished *The Fool Hath Said* was not sustained; the world crowded in again. Most men who have had a considerable religious experience will probably be familiar with the feeling of barrenness and aridity under which the spirit wilts, for a time, when the experience is complete. (Not that such an experience can ever be really 'complete', nor that any man who has caught, even for a brief moment, a glimpse of the divine spark, can ever be quite the same again.)

I longed for a freshening of inspiration, a replenishment, as it were, of the spirit's wells; to gain it I suddenly packed up and went to the Holy Land. It was the most wonderful of all the journeys in a life that has known many journeys — though there is no need to remind the reader of it here, as I have already tried to render an account of it in yet another book.<sup>1</sup>

A few pictures from that journey, however, may be recalled, as though we were flicking through the pages of an album of snapshots before replacing it on the shelf.

We will study them in the next chapter.

<sup>1</sup> *No Place Like Home* (Jonathan Cape).

## CHAPTER VIII

### SACRED AND PROFANE

I TRAVELLED to the Holy Land by easy stages, through Austria, Hungary and the Balkans, for even in those days it was obvious that the time was coming to say goodbye for ever to eastern Europe. And there were certain memories that I wanted to revive before it was too late; they were like jewels that needed polishing, so that when the dark days came I could take them out of their casket, and find them still burning bright. I wanted to stand, once again, before the Bronzino of the Holy Family in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, letting the miraculous harmony of its design play upon my senses, fixing its colour for ever — the pale violet of the Virgin's scarf, the sky of brooding green against which a blue bird hovers, the roses and purples of the robes which drape the body of the Infant — so milk-white, so translucent. I wanted to stand once more at twilight under a painted ceiling in the palace of Schönbrunn, looking through a tall window down the long avenues, flanked with baroque statues, round which the winter mist was curling. I knew the very window I should choose, out of a thousand such windows, and I knew the exact hour, just before dusk, when the watery sunlight would be trickling through the frieze of golden lacquer dragons that writhed on the walls behind.

I wanted other, more mundane pleasures. I wanted to listen to *zigeuner* music, not in the smart restaurants of Budapest, but in a little inn I knew of, far out on the Hungarian plains, and as I listened, to drink the nectar of the world, Tokay, which is less a wine than a song, a song fashioned in eternal summer. I wanted to lay awake at night, staring through the thick plate-glass window of a *wagon-lit*, watching a golden moon scudding over the top of some strange Roumanian forest, thrilling as the train clattered over an iron bridge, catching a swift glimpse of white cataracts foaming over dark rocks.

I revised my memories; I burnished my jewels; they are still

bright and fresh, though I think that I will put them back again, for they are not really for sharing. Most of the friends with whom I saw these things are dead — and not too comfortably dead at that — for most of them were artists, or Jews or aristocrats, and Europe was rapidly being made unsafe for all such persons. However, there is one, in the latter category, to whom I would like to pay a last tribute — Queen Marie of Roumania.

When I arrived in Bucharest, I had no intention of staying for long, as I was impatient for Athens, where memory promised the richest harvest of all. Besides, Bucharest itself is a tawdry town, a third-rate Paris, a façade of bad stucco over a core of barbarism. Its only attraction for the tourists is — or was — the amusing sense it gave him of living in a musical comedy. Life revolved, as though in a rather clunisy waltz, round the baroque palace, where the musical-comedy King lived a very badly written life, occasionally sallying forth in a fabulous uniform to make the sort of speech that brings down the house at the end of the second act. The uniforms of Bucharest had to be seen to be believed; it was Carol's delight to spend long hours pondering the merits of a violet glove for a sergeant of the guard or a crimson feather for a captain of the police. Only a Carlyle could have done justice to the picture of this monarch of millinery, pale-faced, aloof, desperately in love with his auburn mistress, employing his last days of power in dressing up his puppets in vivid colours, against a lowering curtain of disaster.

The picture is rendered all the more tragic by the fact that Carol, in spite of the monumental *gaffes* which mark his career, was courageous and intelligent. If he had been called upon to fight, although he might have gone to war in a costume designed for Hollywood, he would have acquitted himself like a man. His position was impossible, and it was made even more so by the stupidity of the Western powers, whose whole policy was calculated to throw the country into the arms of Russia.

But if Carol's position was impossible, what of his mother, Queen Marie?

I was soon to see.

## § 11

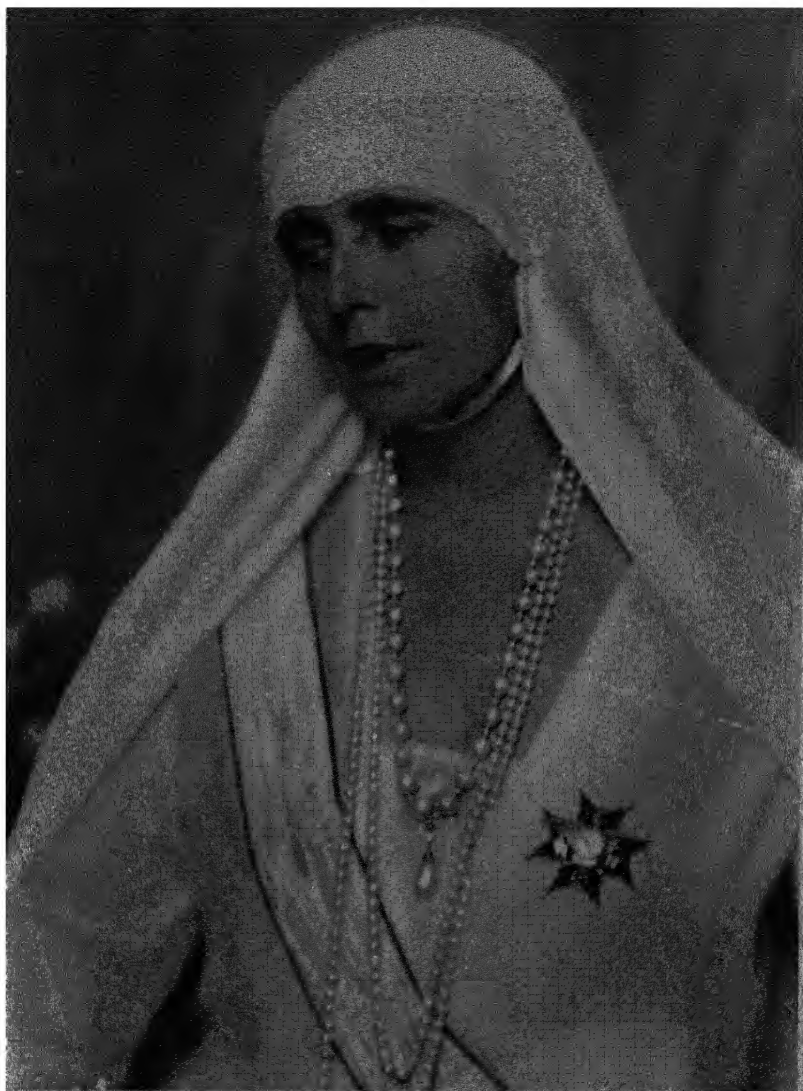
I called on her at her palace at five o'clock. She was looking ovelier than ever. She had grown very slim, for she was already a sick woman; but though she was over sixty she still had the grace of a girl. Her hair was half gold, half silver, her eyes were brave and clear, she had exquisite hands.

As we sat by the fire, talking, as I watched her in her long robe of flame-coloured silk, with a triple row of flawless pearls, I thought: 'This is the Queen of fiction, this is the Majesty of the fairy-tale books.' And I could not help reflecting, somewhat sadly, that the world had 'got her' quite wrong. She was her own worst witness. When she set pen to paper, for publication, she struck poses which did not become her, she became, at times, even a little vulgar. Yet her private letters — the letters, for instance, which she wrote to my friend Ray, were tender and sincere. When she travelled abroad, either in Europe or in America, something always seemed to go wrong; the royal cavalcade degenerated into a circus.

She was many women in one; she was a lover, a scholar, a *religieuse*, a politician, a mother. Her words were so moving that when at last I left her, far too late to catch my train, I went straight to my room and made a record of the whole conversation, though for obvious reasons only fragments of it can be printed here. But I do not think it will surprise many people to learn that she spoke with bitterness of her son, and of what life had done to him. It was only recently that the streets of London had been plastered with newspaper placards bearing the words 'CAROL THE CAD'. She would have been hardly human if that sort of thing had not wounded her. She longed for him to quieten down, to step out of the limelight.

She spread out her hands and cried: 'From whom did he inherit this passion for the spectacular? Certainly not from *me*. Nor from my husband. Sometimes my husband used to say to me: "I think I had better wear some of my decorations tonight." He had at least seven rows of them. And I used to say: "Put them all back in the drawer." And he always put them back.





QUEEN MARIE OF ROUMANIA



## SACRED AND PROFANE

But now — there is a new medal in Roumania every day.'

She paused. Then, in a softer voice: 'It is not his fault; it is the fault of the people around him. They all kowtow to him. It is terrible, what power does to people. When I was a queen I disciplined myself to have disagreeable people around me, people who would always be near at hand to tell me the truth. It was like a purge that I took, every morning. I had power, too, but never the absolute power that he has had. I don't deny that I should have liked it, if only to see what it did to me.'

I asked her about Lupescu. At the mention of the name she became very *grande dame*; the temperature of the room seemed to drop. 'I have only seen her once,' she said. 'Years ago, at a ball. She was dancing with her husband, who was an officer. She seemed to me quite insignificant, and she was wearing pink, which was hardly the colour to wear with that hair. I suppose she has what they call sex appeal.' (She made 'sex appeal' sound like some very odious disease.) 'She certainly has a good business head. They tell me that she has saved millions. Her jewels are far more important than mine. But then — if *I* were to ask the government for the money for a fur coat there would be a terrible scene.'

She returned to the subject of her son.

'That terrible newspaper article — "Carol the Cad". Besides, it was unjust, for he is a brave man, and he is intelligent. Yet he seems fated to do things which *force* people to call him names. It might be a good thing for him if he went to England; they might make him realize, there, how one behaves. Do you think *you* could help?'

'In what way, ma'am?'

'By introducing him to some decent people.'

The idea of introducing a reigning monarch to my small and not very glittering circle of acquaintances, in the hope that they would teach him manners, struck me as somewhat impractical. I suggested that perhaps His Majesty would not care for my friends.

'Or do you think the Oxford Group would help?' Before I could reply she went on: 'But no. I have met Buchman. I did

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not like him. He seemed to me a snob. He spoke of God as if He were the oldest title in the Almanach de Gotha. And all that business about telling one's sins in public — He wanted me . . . *me* . . . to get up before my children and confess everything I had ever done! It is spiritual nudism! *Ça se ne fait pas.*' She made an eloquent gesture. 'Why, even when I write a letter in this prison of a palace, I have to wear triple . . . tr-r-riple gloves!'

She rose, and began to pace round the room, now and then touching one of the great Byzantine crucifixes, as though to gain comfort from it.

'It is grotesque, my situation. Nobody ever comes to see me. Nobody consults me about anything. Only once a month is my grandson allowed near me, and then he only stays for an hour. I am isolated. I might as well be in jail. As for money, if there were a crash in the country — and with these idiotic finances there well might be — I should be penniless. I have been able to put nothing abroad. Even my little royalties from my books I have had to bring back to Roumania to pay for the expenses of the palace. Oh, sometimes I want . . . I want to *smack* every single member of this idiotic regime!'

The last part of our conversation was on a happier note. A servant had brought in liqueurs, the logs had ceased to flame and crackle and had turned to a rosy glow, the vast room seemed more intimate. Staring into the fire, she said:

'I am over sixty, but I am still young. Passion in me burns like a white flame, but it doesn't leave ashes; it goes up into . . . into ozone. Perhaps that is the wrong word, but you know what I mean. Of course, today I have no longer the same desires, but I understand everything that young people feel. See!' She leant over to a little bureau, opened a drawer, and drew out a sheaf of manuscript. 'This is the foreword to the fourth volume of my memoirs. It will be the last. And this is what I have written:

Life is like a puzzle of which one finds, little by little, the separate pieces. I believe that I have found all the pieces now, but I am not yet ready to tell you what they are.'

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She folded up the manuscript, held it tight, and gave me a smile that was still dazzling enough to recall the smiles that had fluttered so many hearts in the ballrooms of thirty years ago.

We ended by talking about gardens. Apart from one sentence, I made no record of this part of our conversation; gardening shop is probably tedious to the general public. But this one sentence I did record, for it seemed so exquisitely characteristic. She had been saying how often she used to earn black looks from her Lord Chamberlain by throwing over some public engagement for the sake of her garden, hurrying out to her palace by the Black Sea, to be in time for the lilac or the lilies. The last time that she had done this, the Lord Chamberlain had been particularly insistent. 'But Madame — this function is of the highest importance.' To which the Queen replied: 'My garden is also of the highest importance.' And then — (one can hear her saying it, drawing herself up in those shimmering draperies, flashing those astonishing eyes) —

I have a rendezvous with a rose!

It was sentimental and pretentious, but it was also superb. You can find it tiresome — and doubtless the Lord Chamberlain, for whom roses had no official status, found it exceedingly tiresome — or you can find it enchanting. Like most dramatic lines, it depends on its delivery; and I, who heard her say it, and can catch in memory the echo of that lovely voice, am still under the spell of its enchantment.

### § III

After Roumania I quickened my pace; and since this is no travel book, but merely an album whose leaves we may turn as we choose, let us turn them quickly, spurning the temptation to linger, skimming past palace and mosque and temple, till at last we stand under the sky of the Holy Land.

Of all the memories which I gathered from this fleeting passage, that of the sky above Jerusalem was most precious. It was as no other sky that I have ever seen. Not that it was

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specially vivid, nor lit by any lurid light of dawn or sunset; not even that it was of unusual clarity. There are skies in the tropics which far outshine in magnificence the sky of the Holy Land, and in some parts of Switzerland, at 10,000 feet up, the sky is as brilliant, as hard and polished, as a jewel. But though one may be nearer the stars at such heights, one is by no means so near to God. The skies over the Holy Land are like arches of Heaven; and through those arches, if you listen intently, you seem to catch a drift of music.

Years later, on a mission during the war, my seaplane was obliged to make a forced landing on the Dead Sea. The pilot told us that we should have to stay there all night. It was unthinkable to be so near to Jerusalem without visiting it once again, and so I managed to charter a car to take me on that wild and melodramatic drive to the Holy City, through the scattered, skeleton mountains, from whose bones the black goats pick their pitiful fodder. I wanted only to see if I had been fooling myself about that sky. But no. It was dusk when I arrived, the evening was grey and rainswept, and all around me the streets were filled with the evidence of war and hatred. But the sky did not fail me; I do not believe that it ever would, to a man who looked up to it with prayer; for as you do so you are conscious of arms that bend in shelter, and hands that beckon in love.

And after the sky, the flowers! I do not know if anybody has ever written a book about the wild flowers of the Holy Land; if not, such a book is long overdue. My journey was in early spring, when the scarlet anemones swept through the valleys like rivers of blood, and when the fields near Nazareth were brilliant with sheets of the tiny *iris reticulata*, so that one might think the faithful had been hanging the hillsides in purple in honour of the King of Kings. I was fortunate, in my wanderings, to have by my side a companion of exceptional erudition, who told me many things about these flowers that I might otherwise never have discovered. I remember, for example, picking some scarlet and purple anemones that were growing in a thorn bush, because, being forced to struggle

towards the light, they had longer stalks. As I did so, he quoted to me: 'My love is like a lily among the thorns' — and he told me that the anemone is usually thought by scholars to be the original 'lily of the field'. It is, indeed, of the lily family; its colours are scarlet and purple, which are the royal colours, so that the comparison of its petals to the robes of Solomon is as apt as it is beautiful. However, there is another school of thought which give the honour to the wild *gladiolus atrovioleaceus*, which is like a tiny sword lily of deep violet. It does not really matter very much. Such controversies pale before the stupendous fact that Jesus walked the very fields in which these flowers have blossomed unchanged through the ages, and perhaps one of them which we pick today is sprung from the seed of a flower over which His shadow fell.

## § I V

I will resist the temptation to write at length about the Holy Land, but I cannot tear myself away without a final word. It is simply that the tumbled, burning hills and valleys of Palestine are today, in this tortured twentieth century, a living, triumphant witness to the truth of the Bible Story.

This is, of course, a very personal reaction. Some travellers go to Palestine with a light in their eyes and leave it with a sneer on their lips. They are repelled — as Jesus would certainly have been Himself — by the schisms in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, their ears are affronted by the babel of tongues that echoes through its dim pillars, with the Catholics and the Armenians and the Greeks and the fanatics of heaven knows how many other creeds, squabbling perpetually over the holy relics and the sacred sites. I can only say that all this seemed to me of little importance. It is the sort of thing which was bound to happen, and one can guess what Jesus would have said about it.

To me this church was so charged with spiritual force that to breathe its air was like breathing music. My moment of greatest emotion, oddly enough, was not connected with any work of

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art nor even with any real or supposed relic of Our Lord. It occurred when I was groping my way down the dark, twisted staircase that leads to the not very interesting chapel of St. Helena. If you strike a match and hold it to the wall, you see that it is scarred with a mass of tiny crosses, chipped into the hard stone. These crosses were made by the crusaders. When I learnt this, I stopped on the staircase, and the whole picture seemed to come to life before me — the crowd of eager, sweating soldiers in the light of the flickering torches. I seemed to hear the beat of hammer and chisel, and through it the gabble of dialects, the medieval French, the English that Chaucer would have spoken. There they all were, far from their native lands, making their mark on Eternity, like boys who carve a sweetheart's name on the bark of some old tree.

Of course, if you choose, you can find plenty in Palestine to offend you. I was bitterly disappointed, for example, by the Garden of Gethsemane, which I had thought would have been the climax of all emotional experiences. It is a dreadful plot, bounded on one side by a modern Franciscan church of startling hideousness, and on another by a row of ugly iron railings. It is permeated by the odour of a public sewer and the fussy little beds are not even weeded. I fled from it as soon as possible.

But that was the one and only disillusionment. All over Palestine I had the sense of walking through a living manuscript, every flower and bird and stone stood out like the golden illumination of a faded text. I remember standing in the doorway of a baker's shop in Hebron — a sort of cave lit by the flare of a huge oven which was built on a Roman foundation. As I watched the men tossing the loaves on to the hot iron, a boy staggered in with a load of grass which he threw into a corner. And the text seemed to dance before me: 'As the grass which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven.' I remember passing a group of tents by the wayside on the road to the north; they were square in shape and pitch black, because they were made of goat-hair. Yes, they were 'black as the tents of Kedar' — and here was an echo of that superb phrase in Revelations: 'The sky turned black as a sackcloth of hair.'



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Most of all, perhaps, I remember Nazareth, and how I wandered away from the shambles of architecture which has grown up there, into the old city. And how I turned into a little side-street and suddenly found myself looking through a doorway into a room which must have corresponded in every detail with the room in which Christ was born. There was a donkey in a corner, and hens pecking grain from the floor. Against the opposite wall there was an old trough. Nobody was about, so I entered and went up to it; it was filled with soft sweet hay. If a woman, a very poor woman, had a baby in such a room, and if she had nowhere to lay him when her arms were tired, where would she put him but here?

And afterwards, I had a drink of water at the well they call 'Mary's Well'. It is the only well in Nazareth, there has never been another, and Mary *must* have used it. Day after day she must have filled her pitcher here. And here, too, the young Jesus *must* have come, and cupped His hands and drunk.

But we must close this album, or I shall be writing a book about the Holy Land, after all.

As far as the personal side of this story is concerned, all I need say is that I returned from Palestine in a mood of the highest exaltation.

It did not endure.

## CHAPTER IX

### A CURTAIN FALLS

I SAT in the dingy bedroom of an Oxford hotel wondering what sort of devil it was that had entered into me.

Ever since my return from Palestine I had been tortured by insomnia. People who have never suffered from this complaint are apt to dismiss it lightly; those who do so might be instructed by a glance at the statistics of suicide. Ninety per cent of all cases of suicide are directly attributable to insomnia. Insomnia does not consist in waking up for a few minutes in the middle of the night, reading a chapter of a book and then dozing off again. It means getting out of bed in desperation, at one or two in the morning, dressing and coming downstairs, and wandering about an empty house till dawn finds you with aching eyes and a splitting head. After a week or so of this you neither feel nor look very pretty.

It was in this sort of state that I had come to Oxford; I thought that perhaps the Group might help me. The trailing clouds of glory which had accompanied me from Palestine were wearing very thin; all the doubts and questionings which had whispered in the shadows after I had finished *The Fool Hath Said* were now repeating themselves, more and more clamorously. I wanted again to find the simple faith that I had known before, when I first bent over the flowers at Glatton.

But the first meeting of the Group was quite dreadful. Dr. Buchman reminded me more than ever of an American dentist, or rather, of a salesman of dental appliances ('use our special brushes and your teeth will last for ever'; 'use our special doctrine and you'll gain eternity').

What happened after the meeting was even worse. For I said to my chief Grouper friend — one of Buchman's right-hand men: 'I do hope that when we meet again there will be some "witnesses", like last year — you know what I mean, people who will get up and tell how their whole lives have been changed.'

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To which he replied, with a bright laugh: 'Oh, but those people you heard were our star turns. We put them on specially for you.'

Why this should have shocked me so much I do not know; the fact remains that it did. I had thought that those men and women whom I had heard the year before were speaking as the spirit moved them, almost as though they were 'speaking with tongues'. Now it seemed that they had only been the high-spots in an evangelistic vaudeville. Surely that was not 'absolute honesty', which was the first of the four principles of the Group?

Such was the question I asked myself, sitting in that dingy hotel, waiting till it was time to go to the next meeting — which was to prove my last. And since the Group is still going strong, since it is evidently in possession of large financial reserves, we might pause here, for a moment, to examine those four principles in the light of practical experience.

### § I I

Absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. Those are the four pillars which are supposed to sustain the fabric of this movement. Let us consider them one by one.

#### *Absolute Honesty*

If this is taken as only applying to oneself, if it is confined to a ruthless personal examination, it is obviously desirable, not only as a religious exercise but as a commonplace of everyday conduct. We are all inclined to fool and flatter ourselves, drawing rosy veils over the harsh outlines of the Ego. It can do none of us harm to sit down quietly, from time to time, and look ourselves squarely in the face. If we look long enough and deeply enough we shall see, behind our own image, another image, either of good or of evil. It is always there; and we might as well find out, or try to find out, which it is.

But if 'absolute honesty' means, as it has come to mean in the Oxford Group, a giggling exhibitionism, from people who really

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have not so very much to exhibit, then it is drab and morbid.

This slogan is the result of cheap and muddled thinking, for falsehood is the foundation of almost everything that raises man above the level of the brute. The essential difference between a man and an animal is that man has learned to lie; this, though it may outrage the susceptibilities of the R.S.P.C.A., is a point in favour of man. An animal cannot disguise its rages, its pains nor its appetites; if it is hungry it must howl, if it is frightened it must run away, if it is angry it must snarl and bare its teeth.

Man — except in certain degraded institutions like the House of Commons — does not behave like that. He has learned better. He can and does disguise his passions, and disguise is the first step towards control.

If this is true of his life as an individual, it is doubly true of his life in the family. I have known five marriages that were wrecked by the Oxford Group — by this pernicious practice of 'absolute honesty'. In each case they were wrecked by totally unnecessary confessions of a sexual nature. In two of these cases there was not even any question of physical misconduct; the husbands, in an orgy of self-exposure, merely admitted that their eyes had wandered, and that they had been tempted by other women. Such admissions, once in a way, may possibly clear the air — though even that is doubtful; as a regular feature of married life they are humiliating and intolerable.

Family life is a fabric of delicate half-truths and heroic lies; and the universal application of Oxford Group principles would utterly destroy it.

### *Absolute Purity*

This is another example of muddled thinking. Absolute purity, if it means anything at all, means complete sexual repression on all occasions not directly aimed at the reproduction of the species. That, in my opinion, is poison and lunacy.

For the word 'repression' the Groupers substitute the word 'sublimation', which is prettier, and can be intoned with the eyes raised to the ceiling. They have, of course, a case there. There are many noble examples in history of men and women

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who, having been denied the consolations of normal love — even more often, of abnormal love — have directed their pent-up energies to the service of some great cause. I do not wish to give unnecessary offence, and so I will refrain from the temptation to make a list of some of the world's saints whose whole lives are an example of the sublimation of sex.

But though one can pay sincere tribute to these people, it is neither possible nor desirable for the rest of the world to follow their example. For the vast majority of men and women, sexual sublimation is prohibited by the very conditions of their social existence; at best they can only achieve a sort of grudging and half-hearted repression, by which their lives will be neither sweetened nor simplified.

### *Absolute Unselfishness*

I should have to bring a whole collection of family skeletons rattling out of the cupboard to explain why I mistrust this apparently spotless ideal. All I care to say here is that I have seen several people's lives brought to the brink of ruin because of one woman's absolute unselfishness. If you strip this vague and mushy ideal to its essentials, how does it reveal itself? As a complete abrogation of the rights of the individual concerned. For example, an absolutely unselfish wife must endure, year in and year out, the persecution of a drunkard. She must never assert herself, never speak harshly to him, never protest when he revolts her sensibilities, terrifies her children, turns her house into a lunatic asylum, gambles away her money. 'It is not *him*,' she must say. 'It is a disease.' Or again: 'I took him for better or for worse; I must endure it to the end.'

Such women exist by the thousand; the Oxford Group approves of them; I do not. They are magnificent but mad. Unselfishness, if carried to these extremes, is an obsession that does nothing but prolong unnecessary pain. (Read Stefan Zweig's *Beware of Pity*).

### *Absolute Love*

This is the only one of the four standards which I can accept without difficulty — though I do not consider that it robs a

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man of his right to lose his temper in the face of cruelty and oppression, nor, having lost it, to give violent expression to his indignation. However, I have not really the philosophical equipment to argue about this; I can only refer the reader to a previous passage, in which I confessed to a feeling that if only my faith were strong enough, I could walk into the cages of lions without hurt.

There is some important truth here — important in the sense that any completely honest confession of any man on such a subject is important. What it is, I hardly know. All I know is that I — as a unit in the creative plan — am linked in love to all the superficially evil things in creation — to bullies and cowards and thieves, to snakes and toads and ‘things that go bump in the night’ — to Hitler and Nero and the Borgias and all the human beasts who, from any man-made standards of right and wrong, are inexcusable, and exist only to be crushed under foot. These beings I accept and embrace.

How is it possible to live life on any other terms? How is it possible to draw the curtains and look up to the sky and greet the sun? You cannot split the world into partitions, apportion it into tiny squares of approval and disapproval. You must take it and grip it in the whole of your hand, and the whole of your heart, nettles and all.

The mystics know the truth of this. Their eyes are clear always; they are not like ourselves, who see a gleam of moonlit truth, follow it down a shadowed glade of doubt, and end up in the dark, clasping our hands in despair in an avenue of barren branches. *They* know. But sometimes *we* know too.

And this is what I know. That all is lovable. That all is meet and ordained and perfect. The poison in the fang of the serpent — that is right. The clouds over the brain of the lunatic — they are correctly disposed. The folly in my own heart, the tinkling of the clown’s bells that echo through my brain, they have their appointed harmony. And one day, through the discord, I shall hear the tune, and spell it out, and know it for the music that it is.

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### § III

But as I left the hotel to go to that last meeting I was in no such mood of acceptance; my nerves were strung so tightly that I felt like snarling at everybody.

The little hall was crowded with about two hundred people. There was a large percentage of young women, and today they seemed to me strangely repulsive; they were both repressed and complacent; their virginity was not a flaming militant purity, but an asset to be smug about, like money in the savings bank. 'My virtue is still intact' — 'My bank balance is still on the credit side'; one felt that they would make those two statements in exactly the same tone of voice.

There was the same air about the young men. God forgive me if I were ever to sneer at any man's effort to keep himself clean, but true purity is creative, it is a form of shining self-expression; it has, indeed, a quality of passion about it.

Here there was no radiance — one had rather the sense that the young men were trying out purity as they might try out a new sort of pill, and the results were sadly unbecoming . . . unbecoming in the most obvious physical sense. These young men were ugly. They were pale and spotty and twitchy, and the palms of their hands were wet. Their hair was untidy. Their whole appearance lacked lustre.

Except Dr. Buchman himself. There he was on the platform, and *he* was lustrous enough. His pink cheeks sparkled; his spectacles glittered; his protuberant cuffs were dazzling white; his dark blue trousers were beautifully creased; and his shoes were bright as mirrors.

I sat down at the back and stared around me. All the members of the audience had little notebooks in which they were busily scribbling their 'guidance'. One or two of the young women, recognizing me, handed me their notebooks for my autograph, giggling as they did so. In a sort of dream I signed them — and I remember that as I signed the last one I wrote my name just below the pencilled phrase 'Stop *Sunday Express* and take in the *Observer*'. So God was guiding the journalistic

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tastes of His followers too! I had an urge to scribble underneath: 'But don't believe a word of the dramatic criticisms of either of them.'

And then the voice of Dr. Buchman:

'Shall we have a few moment's Quiet?'

Instantly the scribbblings and the whisperings ceased. The eyes of Dr. Buchman closed behind their sparkling glasses. The eyes of many others closed. Mine remained open, and in them the tears began to gather. I heard the birds singing outside, I knew there were roses in bloom and green lawns and a river running; but how far away they seemed! I was a prisoner. I was in a lunatic asylum. I had gone mad, stark, staring mad. All these people were mad too. It would not matter if only I weren't so tired — so unutterably tired, because then I could escape.

Once more, I managed to pull myself together.

It was for the last time.

### § I V

The nasal twang of Dr. Buchman broke the silence.

He called for 'witnesses'.

A smartly dressed woman rose to her feet. She began, in a thin, sugary voice. 'I have been having a great deal of trouble with my maid. It seemed to me that she was lazy and didn't look after my clothes properly. And that worried me because nowadays I suppose no woman can have quite as many clothes as she wants.' (Polite laughter.)

'Then the Group came into my life and I was "changed", and I found I hadn't been really honest with her. I had told her, for instance, that I had bought two black dresses because I wanted them for mourning, whereas I really only wanted them because they were becoming to me. So we started "sharing", and she told me that once when I was away, she had worn my clothes (which I had always suspected), and I told her I was jealous because her figure was better than mine, and now we're the *greatest* friends. I think it only shows how God works in us if we will only *allow* Him to.'



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She sat down. There was applause. Dr. Buchman beamed. 'That is a fine thought,' he said (pronouncing 'thought' as though it were spelt 'thot'). 'God works in us if we will only allow Him to! Make a note of it friends.'

At this injunction there was much scribbling in the notebooks. During the scribbling a young man had risen to his feet. In an exaggerated Oxford drawl he observed:

'It came to me the other day, when I was reading a book on the early history of electricity, that God is using the Oxford Group to release the spiritual forces of the twentieth century just as He used the scientists to release the electrical forces of the eighteenth.'

This pompous and highly questionable statement elicited much applause. We were all told to write it down. The young man was asked by Dr. Buchman, if any equally impressive 'thots' had come to him, but God, apparently, had felt that He had given him enough for one day, so no more were forthcoming.

But a great deal else was forthcoming. Young women who had been cross at breakfast, but had now been 'changed', and were cross no longer. Business men who had drunk port in the afternoon to the detriment not only of their souls but their business. Now they were 'changed', the port was a thing of the past and trade was booming. Authors (unpublished), and artists (unhung), whose work had deepened and broadened beyond recognition, though not apparently to the extent of selling. Pettiness after pettiness, folly after folly — suddenly the whole thing was unbearable to me. I could stomach it no longer.

If I had been in a normal condition I should have begun to laugh uproariously. As it was, I was in the first agonizing stages of a nervous breakdown, and I began to cry. I cried, silently, but I knew that at any moment I should be sobbing out loud.

With the tears streaming down my face, I staggered to my feet, stumbled over a number of astonished people, and somehow or other got out of the room. Nobody followed me.

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It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. For a moment I paused in the garden, trying to pull myself together. The nasal voice of Dr. Buchman floated through the open window, and from time to time there were occasional twitters of laughter, for the Groupers, remember, were all on excellent social terms with God. Then I turned away, climbed into the car, pressed the starter . . . and that is all I remember for the space of nearly nine hours. How I drove that car to London must always remain a mystery. Some queer automatic mechanism of the brain must have guided the wheel and used the brakes. (On the following morning the car was discovered undamaged, with its lights on, in a side-street about two miles from Hampstead Heath. Presumably the automaton which was then in control of me had some reason for leaving it there.)

When I 'came to' it must have been nearly midnight, and I was standing under a bright light in the little hall of the house in Hampstead, staring at the front door, waiting for it to open. How long I had been there I do not know; it may have been a few minutes, it may have been several hours. All I knew was that sooner or later somebody would open that door, and that then I could fall down and go to sleep. Till then it would not be safe to sleep. The little house was full of devils.

At last there were steps outside. The door opened, and I saw the cheerful face of Gaskin. He stared at me as if he had seen a ghost.

'Whatever has happened, sir?'

'I can't stop crying, Gaskin.'

Nor could I. It was useless to try to sleep, with those great sobs tearing me to pieces. I spent the night roaming the Heath on the arm of a friend, trying to walk myself into a stupor. But the sobs would not stop. When the doctor came in the morning it was quite impossible to speak to him — not that there was any need to tell him what was the matter. He murmured, 'Acute nervous exhaustion', rang up a nursing home and booked a room. An hour or two later a specialist was jabbing me in the knee and shining bright lights into my eyes. I heard the gentle voice of a nurse. 'Just roll up your sleeve,' she said. There was

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the sting of ether on my arm. 'It won't hurt — just a prick.' A few moments later I went to sleep, and for three days and nights I was out of the world.

It is popularly supposed that nervous breakdowns are a luxury for the idle rich.

The Oxford Group taught me otherwise.

## CHAPTER X

### THE CROOKED CROSS

I STAYED in the nursing home for about a month. They were kind to me, but it was a gloomy place. It was a rambling old Georgian house, facing northwards over the Heath, standing in a garden that was surrounded by a high brick wall. Now and then one would see the figure of a patient strolling very slowly through the grounds, usually with his head sunk down, staring at the path in front of him. The home was exclusively for mental cases, and though none of us was actually mad, in the sense of being certifiable, we were all unhappy or sunken or twisted in some way. And I am quite certain that mental diseases are, literally, *infectious*, that some strange poison seeps through the walls and the ceilings of houses where there is any large congregation of the mentally deranged. One day this fact will be understood, and lunatic asylums will be recognized as the monstrous follies which they really are.

I had a great fear of going mad, for one of the closest friends of my youth had been shut up in a lunatic asylum for nearly fifteen years. During this unhappy time I thought of him often, and always with dread. Desmond W—— had been one of the gentlest and sanest of creatures; we had been together at school and we had shared rooms at Oxford. He was a superb pianist, and if this shadow had not fallen upon him, he would certainly have been famous. But the shadow fell, and it fell almost overnight. He too began to weep, for no apparent reason, but he did not stop at weeping. Some devil entered into him, and the shy, soft-spoken youth that I had known was carried out of his home for ever, screaming obscenities at the mother whom he worshipped. He was so violent that they had to put him in a strait-jacket. Some months later, when he had quietened down, I went to see him. 'He will not speak to you,' they told me. 'He will speak to nobody.' I would not believe it. How was it possible that Desmond, whose every mood I had known — or

## THE CROOKED CROSS

thought I had known — could persist in this monstrous, self-imposed solitude, if I were to entreat him to emerge from it?

All this was fifteen years ago, but as I walked slowly along the paths of the lonely garden, which were always shadowed by branches heavy with rain, Desmond seemed often by my side. Was I going the way he had gone? How vividly I remembered the bleak November afternoon when I had called at Chiswick House, which was the asylum where they had taken him. A mist hung round the deserted gardens, and through the veils of vapour the statues on the lawn seemed to move, to turn their heads. When I rang the bell it echoed far into the depths of the house, and it was followed by another sound, a wild peal of laughter from a distant room.

‘I had better come in with you,’ said the keeper. I told him I would rather be alone. He shrugged his shoulders and said he would wait outside the door — ‘in case’.

When I entered Desmond rose to meet me. He smiled and held out his hand. ‘Beverley!’ he said, and motioned me to a chair. It was almost the last word he ever spoke. No sooner had he said it than a look of indescribable melancholy shadowed his features; all the sadness of the world was in his eyes.

‘What is the matter?’ I said. ‘Why don’t you speak?’

He only stared and stared, always through that curtain of despair.

I tried everything — laughter, anger, silence, indifference. I stayed with him for nearly three hours. It was too much for human endurance, Exhausted, I rose to go. It was then that he spoke again.

‘Don’t go,’ he said. ‘Please don’t go.’

And those, I believe, were the last words he ever spoke on this earth. I stayed with him for another hour, hoping against hope that I could draw him back. But this time the curtain had been drawn for good, and behind it, I felt, there were other spirits beginning to prowl about, spirits that were not merely phantoms of sadness and ennui — there were evil things that were growing angry, resenting my presence, raising their voices, bringing a red light into his eyes.

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

'You did not leave any too soon,' said the keeper, when I opened the door, with Desmond close behind me.

He is still alive, after nearly thirty years. He has not spoken in all that time, except to scream a few obscenities. They tell me that the boy I had known as a slim and sunlit figure of light and grace, whose friendship I had cherished as a delicate and perfect relationship, is now a very frightening object for the human eye. The keepers, they say, demand extra money for looking after him.

It is for this reason that I am vice-president of a certain obscure society with a very high-sounding name. It is called the Society for the Promotion of Voluntary Euthanasia. It might more fittingly be called a society for putting human animals out of their pain.

### § 11

But I did not go mad.

Instead, I went to Germany, which was perhaps the next best thing.

I had a funny little German friend called Peter Klaas. The conjunction of adjectives has a flavour of patronage that is far from my intention. Peter was 'funny' because he made me laugh; he was 'little' because that was how God had fashioned him; he was German because he had been born, one stormy night in 1912, in a high bedroom of a castle overlooking the Rhine. But he was no light comedian; on more than one occasion the Nazis had knocked the smile off his face — knocked it off, quite literally.

He was, in brief, an impoverished German gentleman, who had sought refuge in this country because — as he said to me — he wanted to laugh in his own way, without being told which side he must twist his mouth.

We took the car, with Peter driving, and spent the first night in Hamburg, staying at the Vierjahrzeiten Hotel, in the rooms which had been occupied by Hitler a few days before. I

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decided that I was now quite well, so we went out to a music hall. It was a foolish thing to do. The theatre was immense, and it was packed from floor to floor; the roaring of the crowd terrified me, and to fight off the terror I began to drink, gulping Schnapps after Schnapps as though it were water. Peter put me to bed, crying again, and once more I seemed to see Desmond, watching in the corner, by the heavy curtains.

Next day Peter put me in the car, and we set off for the Harz mountains. All day we drove, higher and higher, into air that was stinging clean.

'These mountains are supposed to be full of witches,' said Peter.

'I don't feel up to witches. Let's go on to Berlin.'

'It would be complete lunacy to go to Berlin. Don't you know that the Olympic Games will soon be beginning?'

'I'd like to see them.'

'You're insane. Berlin will be a seething mass. Every hotel has been booked for months. The whole world will be there.'

'Then we will be there too.'

Peter drove on in silence. At dusk we arrived at a gloomy wind-swept hotel standing on the highest peak of the mountains. Although it was July, it was bitterly cold, and in spite of the wind there was a thick mist that only parted fitfully, as though it were being torn aside by giant invisible hands. I left Peter and walked to the edge of a cliff that dropped a sheer thousand feet into the valley below. The clouds swirled around me, and then parted for a moment. In the dim light I had a vision of the landscape of Germany, most beautiful and most tragic of all the world's countries, far, far away. Then there was darkness again, and nothing but the mist, curling round the bogus Gothic of the hotel, twisting down the corridors, damping the sheets of paper that fluttered on the notice board.

Once again Desmond seemed very close to my side.

I went in and found Peter, who was signing the register.

'Tomorrow,' I said, 'we will go to Berlin.'

'You're mad. . . .'

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‘Not yet. Just on the verge. But if I *am* going mad, I might as well do it with a certain amount of chic.’

Which settled it. That night, for the first time in many weeks, I slept.

### § III

Berlin was a strident city, a screaming city, dressed to kill, over-doped, over-drunk, over-sexed, beflagged from end to end in scarlet and black, tarted up from tip to toe with swastikas, its monuments ablaze with light, a tight, synthetic smile stretched over its ugly face. Berlin, in short, was a whore of a city.

It was in every way the worst conceivable place to visit after a nervous breakdown, and I was visiting it at the worst conceivable time. A high wind was blowing as we drove down the Unter den Linden; the vast flags strained at their masts, and the black and scarlet bunting, writhing against the grey summer sky, put me in mind of the flames of a forest fire. The streets were so crowded that we travelled at a snail's pace, in a glistening crocodile of cars such as Europe had never seen before, and will probably never see again. There were Rolls Royces, white as milk, bearing the pudding-faced aristocracy of England, murmuring to each other that really the Hitler Jugend were rather wonderful, almost like gods, so different from the spindle-shanked undersized youth of Britain, and they didn't *look* as if they wanted a war, did they? There were streamlined Hispano Suizas, with the silver stork on the bonnet arrogantly pointing the way, and vast, open Isottas, snorting and hiccuping at the need to crawl along at less than eighty miles an hour. There were Lincolns and Dusenbergs, and Renaults and Delages — but the best of all, to me, were the Mercedes, with the huge, silver snakes of their exhausts curling outside the body.

As we drove along a Voice was sweeping over the city, magnified by a thousand loudspeakers. It roared at us from the tops of trees, grew a little fainter as we left it behind, roared



## THE CROOKED CROSS

again from a roof, dimmed once more in a side-street, to bellow out in full fury over the teeming Kurfürstendamm. It seemed that wherever one drove in Berlin, that Voice was following, in its nerve-racking alternation of diminuendo and crescendo. It was, I believe, the voice of Goebbels, bidding welcome to the nations of the world, and at the same time intruding a subtle dose of propaganda.

If I had been staying in the centre of this madhouse I should probably have cracked up again; as it was, all the hotels were full and Peter had found rooms in a charming house in Berlin Dahlem, which is the pleasantest residential quarter of Berlin. It was surrounded by high chestnut trees, and it had a pretty garden. Just over the way was a much grander house, where Goering lived, and a few days after we arrived a powerful motor bicycle snorted up to the front gate, driven by a young man who looked almost too much like a Viking. He bore a card from Goering, about a foot square, inviting me to a garden party. Needless to say, I did not go; it would have meant getting dragged into things, and I was not yet ready for that.

There now ensued one of the strangest interludes in my life. Chance, in the shape of a motor accident, had brought me in touch with a young ex-Communist. Through no fault of my own I had run into him one night, and though he was only slightly scratched, the least I could do was to offer him a lift home and a drink.

When he entered my room and stood for the first time in the bright light I realized that he was starving. There happened to be a light supper waiting for me on a tray, and he was staring at it with an expression akin to lust. I asked him to help himself, and made an excuse to leave the room so that he should not be embarrassed. When I returned a few minutes later, the last crumb had gone, and he was stretched over the table with his face buried in his arms, sobbing. Nobody, in his short and tortured life, had ever been kind to him before.

Hans, as we will call him, was twenty-two. He was one of the most striking people I have ever seen; tall, fair, blue-eyed, he might have been the ideal Tristan whom Wagner saw in

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

dreams. His boyhood had been spent in the night-life of Berlin, at a time when the city was the cesspool of Europe. He had sickened of that, and when Hitler came in he joined the Communists — not because he really knew what Communism was, but because he had seen the Nazis beating people up, and he was a kind and gentle creature. In one of Himmler's round-ups he had been arrested and sentenced to six months in Dachau. The scars of that experience were only just fading from his back; they never quite vanished from his eyes.

I decided to make Hans my cicerone in Berlin. It was, to say the least, an unorthodox choice, because he was an outcast, condemned to live in the shadows, shut off from all the normal activities of what the Nazis would call 'decent people'. But that was exactly what I wanted. I had a bad attack of *nostalgie de la boue*. There was a powerful fascination in the thought of lying *caché* in this great city, to which all the ends of the world were come, walking only down the side-streets, shunning the great hotels where one's friends were staying, dining furtively in cafés that were either morally disreputable or politically suspect, sharing the lives of the degenerate, the despairing and the dispossessed.

And so it was. I gave Hans one of my old suits, and arranged to meet him on the following night.

### § I V

That night was the first of many which will haunt me for as long as I live. Hans was true to his promise; he showed me Berlin with the lid off.

A few weeks before, Dr. Goebbels had committed one of the most revolting of all his crimes; he had deliberately put into reverse the machinery which had been previously used for 'cleaning up' Berlin. Before the flood of visitors began to arrive for the Olympic Games, it was the Nazi boast that they had turned Berlin into the most moral city in the world. The scores of shady clubs which had pandered to every form of perversion had been closed; the obscene magazines with their even more

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obscene advertisements had been banned; all the prostitutes had been bundled into munition factories. And then, as the rich tourists began to arrive, whispers reached Dr. Goebbels that they were finding Berlin rather dull. There was nowhere to go at nights, there were no obliging ladies to fill in one's spare time, above all, none of those amusing curiosities of which one had heard so much. Did it mean that Germany could no longer afford such luxuries? Was the Third Reich bankrupt?

Goebbels acted quickly. He cracked his whip, and out of the prisons and the concentration camps crept the tragic personnel of the underworld, with orders to make merry for the benefit of the foreigner. Once again the Monocle opened its doors to the women in dinner jackets, smoking their cigars, slapping each other on the back, calling old friends by masculine names. At first they were nervy, wincing whenever the door opened, in case the police were coming to drag them back again. For some of them had scars and bruises which no amount of liquid powder would conceal. But as the days went on, and the foreigners joined them, they felt safer; they played their part with a will, knowing that they were watched. Perhaps if they acted well enough, Dr. Goebbels might be pleased, and let them stay.

Once again, in dingy garrets, the female impersonators got out their women's clothes, donned their wigs, and sallied out to the Sphinx; once again the mirrors of the Jockey Club reflected the haunted faces of boys dabbing powder on their chins. It was of all situations the most macabre, this marriage of propaganda and pederasty.

There are, I think, three possible reactions to a sight like this. The psychologist, presumably, will view it with calm detachment, and explain the conduct of these freaks in terms of Freud and Jung. The moralist, according to the strength of his convictions, will suggest either that such creatures should be 'put away' or that they should be locked up where they cannot do any harm. The normal man will merely wish to get away into the fresh air — one hopes with pity in his heart. It was not long before I told Hans that I had seen enough.

'No more night-life?'

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

‘No more, Hans.’

‘Good.’ He grinned broadly. ‘Tomorrow we go to bathe.’

It sounds a simple statement — ‘tomorrow we go to bathe’ — it certainly does not suggest any sinister developments. And yet. . . .

On the following morning we set out for the Wannsee, the great lake whose shores, in summer, are black with the bodies of tens of thousands of Berliners. I was not very keen on the idea; the thought of lying in the middle of a sweating mass of German bourgeoisie, nibbling garlic-flavoured *wurst*, did not appeal to me. But Hans insisted; and when we arrived, I was delighted. For he led the way to a beach that was almost deserted — a charming sandy bay, fringed with pine trees. There was a little wooden restaurant, where one could sit on the balcony and drink a glass of wine, with no sound save the wind in the trees and, from over the water, half a mile away, the faint echo of the shouts of the crowd. There were barely a dozen people on the beach, and they all seemed very quiet and subdued.

Doubtless, if my senses had been fully alert, I should have noticed something strange about this beach — the hush that seemed to hang over it, the very fact that it was obviously shunned by the great majority of the populace. But no such doubts perturbed me; I merely assumed that it was, in some way or other, private, and that one had to pay extra for it. As Peter was in charge of the finances, and was inclined to err on the side of economy, this did not worry me.

We went to that beach day after day; always the same people were there, and always they talked in whispers, as though they were in some form of conspiracy together. I began to feel uneasy; after all, there were spies everywhere, and I was leading a very curious life, in company with an ex-political criminal. As an Englishman one was, presumably, safe from molestation, but I didn’t want to be involved in any awkward incident. Besides, there was Hans to think of. Supposing these people on the beach were . . . were what?

What *could* they be?

As I asked myself this question I sat up, and for the first time

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really looked around me — at the old man and his wife nearby, the boys in the corner playing among the rocks, the little family group paddling quietly at the water's edge. And suddenly I understood.

They were all Jews.

That was why Hans, the outcast, had taken me here, to share the life of the other outcasts. That explained the whispers, the timidity, the shrinking into the shadows. Now I knew why, when I had asked the old man for a match the day before, he had started as though I was going to hit him.

I lay down again and blinked up towards the sun. It was something to think that whatever Hitler might do to the members of this tortured race, he could not prevent the sun from shining on them. I made up my mind that, whatever happened, nothing would prevent me from coming always to this little beach. I might be able to make friends with some of the Jews, even to help them a little.

### § v

One day, into this twilight existence, intruded my old friend Hector Bolitho. He bounded into my sitting-room, drew back the curtains and threw open the window. The gesture was symbolic; Hector is not only a distinguished historian but a first-class reporter, and he could not understand why I was lying there in the shadows, with my face turned away from one of the most brilliant spectacles that Europe had ever witnessed.

'What have you done about tickets for the opening of the Olympic Games?'

'Nothing.'

'My dear Beverley, you really are impossible.'

'I forgot.'

'But it'll be historic — the last great gesture of the Third Reich. Everybody on earth will be there.'

'I don't like everybody on earth.'

He looked at me suspiciously. 'Are you by any chance in love?'

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

'I don't think so.'

'In any case, we've simply *got* to be at the opening of those games.'

I felt my conscience stirring. After all, I was supposed to be a journalist. On my desk lay a telegram from Jimmy Drawbell, asking when on earth I was going to send him some stories from Germany. It was really time that I snapped out of it. And so, for the first time since my arrival, I put on a respectable suit, told a somewhat crestfallen Hans that I couldn't come out with him that night, and went out to dine at the Eden.

It is not often that life hands one a perfect short story, cut and dried, with a beginning, a middle and an end, but that is what life now did to me. I will tell it as briefly as possible, keeping to the bald scenario.<sup>1</sup>

The beginning has already been told — the *locale* sketched in, the *dramatis personae* introduced. The situation, too, has been indicated and may be summarized as a competition between two authors, of very different character, to obtain the glittering prize of tickets for the Olympic Games.

It was a situation that seemed, at first, to promise more of humour than of tragedy, though it was to have a tragic conclusion. We both felt that our prestige was involved, and though I don't think either of us could be described as snobs, we had both been accustomed to getting front seats in life's circus whenever we wanted.

However, this time it seemed that we were not going to be so lucky. All the usual channels failed — the British Embassy could do nothing, the German propaganda bureau made no sense, our respective newspaper groups had already allocated their tickets. As we received rebuff after rebuff, Hector's determination increased.

'We are being too modest,' he said one morning. 'Far too modest. I am going to ring up the Information Office and tell them that they can't behave like this to *beruhmt Schriftstellen*.'

<sup>1</sup> The main outline of this story, in the guise of fiction, is published in *Men Do Not Weep* (Jonathan Cape, 1940). In that version I misguidedly introduced a love interest. The bare facts, as here narrated, seem to me far more dramatic.

## THE CROOKED CROSS

‘To what?’

‘*Beruhmt Schriftstellen*. I learnt it today. It means “distinguished novelists”.’

So he went off to call them up. A few minutes later he came back, shaking with laughter.

‘I got on to the wrong department. They thought we were athletes. And before I had time to explain they said: “Are you amateurs?”’

‘Didn’t you get in the *beruhmt Schriftstellen* bit?’

‘There wasn’t time. Besides . . .’ with a sigh, ‘I really don’t feel very *beruhmt* any more.’

Nor, to tell the truth, did I.

On the day before the opening ceremony we were growing desperate; we had exhausted every possible form of contact, with not a glimmer of success. Tickets, it seemed, just did not exist. In the evening we decided to have one last try. ‘We’ll go to all the big hotels and look through the visitors’ lists,’ said Hector. ‘There must be *somebody* who can help.’ It seemed a good idea, so after a cocktail we started off in different directions, arranging to meet at the Eden bar a couple of hours later.

It was not till after an hour’s fruitless endeavour that I turned into the Adlon. As I pushed through the swing doors I saw, advancing towards me, a glittering procession of uniforms, bosoms and diamonds. Evidently some very grand party was on its way to some very exalted function. Suddenly at the head of the procession I saw a familiar face; it was Lord Burghley, who was head of the British delegation to the Olympic Games. He had been a neighbour of mine in the country, and though he had paid an occasional visit to the cottage, my acquaintance with him was so slight that I should not normally have dreamt of approaching him. But the thought of Hector spurred me on. I took a deep breath, stepped forward, and stammered my request.

Burghley could not have been more charming — nor more pessimistic. He wished he could help, but he very much doubted it. People were offering fabulous sums for tickets, and

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being refused. However . . . there might conceivably be a chance of standing room. Would I ring him up in the morning?

I thanked him, and the uniforms, the bosoms and the diamonds moved on. I assumed, of course, that Burghley was merely making a polite gesture, and I decided that it would hardly be worth while to bother him again next day. Still, it was better than nothing, for it was something to tell to Hector.

However, when I reached the Eden there was a smile of triumph on Hector's face. He waved an envelope in my face. 'The best tickets in the whole show!' he cried. 'Right in the front row of the press box, only just above Hitler and Goering and the whole collection.'

'How on earth did you get them?'

Hector bowed from the waist. 'By being more than usually *beruhmt*,' he said.

## § V I

So much for the middle of the story. Now for its fantastic end.

On the following day I was up early, for I had promised to meet Hans, to see the new suit that I had given him, and the streets were so crowded that I did not want to take any risks. Just as I was leaving the house the telephone rang. It was a message from the Adlon, saying that m'lord Burghley had left an envelope for me with the hall porter. So he had been able to get us standing room after all. That was very kind of him — but now we should not need it; I was just about to give a message to that effect when I thought: 'Why not give the tickets to Hans? He would be thrilled to go to the opening, even if he had to stand a mile back.' So I said that I would call for the envelope as soon as possible.

When I reached the Adlon, I picked up the envelope; there were three tickets in it, and I thought I had better keep one of them in case anything went wrong with Hector's arrangements. The other two I gave to Hans, who was waiting outside, dressed in the most appalling clothes that even a German could have



## THE CROOKED CROSS

chosen — with a brownish-yellow jacket, very tight across the shoulders, and plum-coloured pants. With this outfit he wore a pink cricket shirt, open at the neck. For a moment I wondered if so startling a figure would be admitted even into the standing galleries, but he was evidently so delighted with himself that I had not the heart to disillusion him. When I gave him the tickets he could not believe his own eyes; he went pale with delight. He said he would hurry off at once and take a friend of his.

‘And Hans,’ I said, as I got into my car, ‘I think I should wear a tie.’

‘Yes, yes. What colour tie?’

‘A *black* tie, Hans.’

His face fell. ‘Black?’

‘Yes. It would go best with . . . with all the rest.’

He grinned again. ‘Good. I go to get black tie.’ And he darted away down the street.

Nothing went wrong with Hector’s arrangements. A couple of hours later, after battling my way through frenzied crowds, I reached the stadium, gained access to the press-box, and sank into my seat, feeling more than a little fatigued.

It was an astonishing sight. Although there was still an hour to go before the official opening, every seat in the vast arena was filled. The sun was just coming out — Hitler always had ‘royal’ weather — and it glittered on the great gold masts from which the flags of all the nations were fluttering. The air was full of music, not only from the official orchestra, but from all sorts of marching bands in the far distance.

Immediately beneath us, in the next tier, was the Fuehrer’s box. A young German press attaché pointed out to us the place where Hitler would be sitting; it was so close that I could have tossed a paper ball on to his seat. Next to him would be Goering and Goebbels and all the rest of them, mixed up with various royalties. Immediately behind them, already in their places, was a glittering assortment of ambassadors, presidents and high-ranking officers of almost every country in the world.

I put my hand in my pocket for a cigarette; as I did so I felt

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a slip of pasteboard; it was the spare ticket which Burghley had given me. There was no point in keeping it now, and I was just about to throw it away when I noticed that a little plan was printed on it — a number of squares with a cross in the middle. Puzzled, I turned to the other side. And there, painted in large letters of gold, was the word:

### E H R E N G A S T

My heart stopped a beat. For Ehrengast meant — no, it couldn't mean — but it *did* mean — 'distinguished guest'. I thrust the ticket towards Hector.

'Look!'

'Where did you get this?'

'Burghley gave it to me. I thought it was something to do with standing room.'

He turned the ticket over. 'But this is a plan of Hitler's box. And there's your seat, just behind him, marked with a cross.'

I scrambled to my feet. There was no time for explanation. At all costs I must get out, rush down the steps to the tier below, and stop Hans from presenting his tickets. God knows what would happen if I was too late; when I thought of that terrible mustard-coloured jacket barging through the ranks of the diplomats I felt weak at the knees. I should have been guilty of a social *gaffe* of international magnitude, which might have extremely unpleasant consequences. But that was not really what caused me to push my way with such ferocity through the storm-troopers, who were already beginning to close round the entrance in preparation for Hitler's imminent arrival. It was the thought of what they might do to Hans himself. He was a Communist; the brand of Dachau was upon him. How had he got his ticket? They would be bound to ask him that. Who was his mysterious friend? Where had he met him? The possible consequences of my folly were unthinkable.

At last I reached the inner sanctum. Straightening my tie, feeling very conscious of my simple blue suit in a gathering where the smartest frock coat looked dowdy, I walked as steadily as possible to my seat. Thank God the two seats

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adjoining it were empty. Hans had not arrived. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned away, noticing as I did so that the seat next to the one in which Hans would have been sitting was occupied by my old friend Jan Masaryk.

I reached the exit door just as the storm-troopers closed in, and lingered outside, awaiting developments. There was still no sign of Hans. The tension mounted, the Fuehrer was approaching, the distant cheers drew nearer, nearer, and then burst over my head like summer thunder as the big black Mercedes swept up. I had a glimpse of a pale strutting figure with an arm stretched out as though it were some wooden attachment. Then the doors swung to, and from inside came the mighty swell of 'Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles'.

I waited another quarter of an hour and then, more than a little battered, I went back to my seat in the press-box, comforting myself with the thought that Hans must have been delayed in the crowd. If only that had been true!

For Hans was not delayed by the crowd. He turned up just after I had left the entrance. The rest of the story is best told by a faded cutting from the *12 Uhr Blatt*, the Berlin newspaper which specializes in crime. Here it is, in rough translation:

### ARREST OF NOTORIOUS COMMUNIST

The *12 Uhr Blatt* is now able to reveal that Hans Bruckner, ex-inmate of Dachau, was arrested at the Olympic Games last Saturday on the very threshold of the Fuehrer's box.

The attention of the Police was first called to him at the entrance because he was wearing a red tie, the symbol of the criminals of Moscow. He was followed. His companion, a woman of 'a certain type', apparently became alarmed, for she disappeared in the crowd and has unfortunately not been traced.

In spite of this, Bruckner, who was in an excited condition, forced his way ahead to the Official Entrance. The audacity of this type of Criminal may be guessed by the fact that he was in possession of stolen Ehrengast tickets,

## ALL I COULD NEVER BE

which were only a few yards from the seat of the Fuehrer himself.

When he was arrested, and was asked from whom he had stolen the tickets, he refused to give any answer. He would only say, 'From my friend.'

A search of his rooms proved beyond any doubt that he was deeply immersed in criminal activities.

Bruckner was executed at eight o'clock this morning. So may all enemies of the Third Reich perish!

## CHAPTER XI

### MEAN STREETS

IT is easier for a writer to make patterns from fiction than from fact; when he is dealing with the creatures of his imagination it is a simple matter to impose upon them a sense of design, to give to their lives a shape and a purpose. When he is consulting his own diaries, his task is more complex. Where is the shape, and where the purpose? Where are the landmarks? True, he may say to himself: 'In such a year I took such a step, and thereafter my life was changed. But was I changed?' If he is honest he will say, 'Probably not.' In his end was his beginning, in his beginning was his end; and his middle years are a complex of both.

And yet, when I came back from Germany, prepared to take up life again where I had left it off, I was certainly profoundly changed. To outward appearances I was still a young man, but I had, I hope, shed the last remnant of the tiresome juvenility which had been part of my stock in trade. I had seen too much, suffered too much, to be bothered any longer by the thought that I was ten years older than the prodigy who wrote *Twenty-Five*.

And then — which was more important — I no longer had a garden. 'Allways' was sold. Although this book is an honest attempt at autobiography, there is no need to bore the reader with my reason for parting from a place which I had loved so passionately. It was not, as some kind friends have suggested, for any economic reason; it was . . . well, it was just one of those blows which life sometimes sees fit to deal one. And we will leave it at that.

I left the cottage as it stood, walking out of it one summer afternoon, leaving the door open, as though I were going for a stroll in the fields. I had known great happiness beneath the roof of thatch, and I did not want there to be a squalid end to that happiness. The cottage was perfect; that was how I would

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leave it for others; there would be no clutching at straws, no dragging away bits and pieces, to taunt me with the memory of what had been. Better not even to close the door, better to let the breeze blow in, as I walked away. On the table in the hall was a bowl of buttercups, freshly picked. On the old Provençal sideboard there were bottles of wine. In my study, a copy of Chopin's *études* stood on the music-rest, open at the 'Revolutionary' *étude* in E minor, which I had been trying to play for fifteen years and shall probably continue to play, with decreasing success, for a good deal longer.

I did not look back as I stepped into the lane and got into the car. To look back, at such a garden, was to be lost. I had no need to brighten my memories, nor shall I ever feel such a need. I knew — and know — what I should find in every inch of it. I knew every twist and turn of the gnarled trunk of the old wistaria that clambered round my bedroom window — ('my' bedroom window? It was mine no longer). I knew the last intricate tracery of the damson trees, in winter, in summer, and in spring. I knew the grouping of every lily cluster, the bend of every branch, the play of light and shade on the little pond; I knew each crevice in the rocks where I had planted the irises that I had brought from Nazareth, each curve of the hedge where the white violets grew. All these patterns were traced, for ever, on my heart, and they are probably the most worthy patterns that life has printed there.

It was at this point that Gaskin came, once again, to the rescue. He must have seen that I was miserable in the tiny house in Westminster, with nothing to stare at except a window box, and only a tiny back yard in which I attempted, somewhat unsuccessfully, to grow a few yellow chrysanthemums. At any rate he decided that it was time for us to move. Naturally, he did not put it like that — he merely dropped subtle hints. What a pity it was, he would sigh, that the quiet, charming people next door were moving, and how unpleasant it would be if the next tenants played the radio all night. Had I noticed that Number 7 and Number 9 were also to let? Doubtless they would soon be filled with squalling babies. Did I think it

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possible that New Street, instead of Going Up, as we had anticipated, was in fact Going Down?

I did not very much care, at that juncture, whether it was going sideways, so Gaskin tried a new technique. In his spare time he took to going to Hampstead Heath, and returned, beaming with health and spirits, declaring that he felt better than if he had spent the day at Brighton. 'Such nice houses, too,' he would add artfully. 'You really should look at them, sir.' He had peered through the garden door of Sir Gerald du Maurier's house, Cannon Hall. Never had he seen such a display of delphiniums — far bigger and brighter than any we had ever grown at Allways. He also intruded, with serpentine cunning, that the rates at Hampstead were Going Down, whereas here, in Westminster, they were almost certainly Going Up.

Then one day he returned with his arms full of one of the most magnificent bunches of mixed flowers that I have ever seen. A friend of his, he observed casually, had grown them in his little Hampstead garden. It was wonderful, was it not, what could be done in London? There was really no need to buy any flowers — which reminded him that my very large bill from Solomon's was still unpaid.

That settled it. I have the strongest possible suspicion that those flowers never came from a Hampstead garden at all, and that Gaskin had paid for them out of his own pocket. At any rate, he won the day. 'All right,' I said, 'if you really feel we ought to move, we'll move. Only you'll have to find the house yourself.'

He found it. It was a charming little house in a quiet close, standing on the side of a hill that looked far out over the city. Although it was only twenty minutes from Piccadilly, there was a feeling of country about it. The garden was very small and starkly triangular. 'I shall never be able to do anything with this,' I said to Gaskin; to which he replied: 'We shall see.' We certainly did, but that is another story.

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### § II

It was fortunate that I had this pleasant urban background, where at least one was aware of the passing of the seasons, where one could look up to the sky through a pattern of leaves rather than through a grille of chimney-pots. For after returning from Germany I came to the somewhat belated conclusion that it was time that I learned something about my own country, from the point of view of the man in the street. I had written about poverty, but I had never really lived in a slum; I had expressed opinions about miners without even bothering to go down a mine; and, like everybody else, I had aired my views on unemployment and the distressed areas, without any first-hand knowledge of either. I felt ashamed of these shortcomings, and as soon as we were settled in Hampstead I set out once again on a series of journeys that were to give me some of the grimmest moments I have ever spent.

I should be the first to admit that the result of these investigations was to turn me into a first-class bore. I always seem to get so damned worked up about things that I lose all sense of proportion. In the old pacifist days I wanted to blow up the War Office, when I was under the influence of the Oxford Group I wanted to drag people to church by the scruff of their necks, and now . . . well, I felt like marching through Claridge's with a banner proclaiming the doom of the rich. It is a pity; it gives a timbre of hysteria to work which might otherwise be worthy of more serious consideration. This is particularly evident in the book which was the result of my life among the under-dogs. It was called *News of England*, and it was published in 1938, with the sub-title *A Country without a Hero*. It was certainly the worst book ever written by Beverley Nichols, and possibly by anybody else. It was intended to be a comprehensive review of the state of the nation at the moment; and since my views about that state would have seemed extreme to a Jeremiah, it should at least have been a vigorous polemic. It was not. *News of England* is a shocking book, a frantic running



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round in circles or — more accurately — a wild clutching at straws. Like most bad books, it was hell to write.

Some of it was first published, in agonized extracts, in the *Sunday Chronicle* — which reminds me that it is about time that we referred to my weekly page of journalism. It was still going strong, and though from time to time I felt that I had had enough of it, I continued to write 'Page 2' until the fortunes of war took me to India in 1943. It was a long life for that sort of feature, and I don't suppose that I should have kept it up had it not been for the unfailing co-operation of James Wedgwood Drawbell, who was editor until the end of the war. When Jimmy left the *Chronicle*, to conquer new fields in Fleet Street, it was inevitable that I should go with him. I don't think that either of us has ever regretted it.

A fellow journalist once said to me that Jimmy Drawbell had been born with a blue pencil in his mouth. The epigram gives a false impression of him; for though he is a born editor, he uses the blue pencil but sparingly, he gets results by giving people their heads. Himself a brilliant story-teller, he has an infectious enthusiasm which makes one see stories at every corner of the street. Take luncheon with him, sip a cocktail, look across the restaurant and see a pretty girl, murmur to him: 'That's an attractive creature, but what an awful hat!' and Jimmy will cry: 'My God — what an article! What a story! Can't you *see* it, Beverley? The woman who loses her man because of her hat! Think of it! The hundreds of women, the thousands of women, the millions and *millions* of women who chuck away their chances of happiness simply because of this fantastic slavery to fashion! Let me have two thousand words on that and we'll give it a double spread and simply *pepper* the page with pictures of the most God-awful hats that any man ever saw. Think of the captions: "Could you love her if she wore *this*?"'

Such outbursts, I should add, are delivered in a slightly Scottish accent and accompanied by copious draughts of Vichy water which, to Jimmy, is as intoxicating as vodka.

And while I am on this subject, I would like to say a word in

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defence of those much maligned creatures, the newspaper proprietors. I have worked for most of them, from Northcliffe onwards, and without exception they have invariably given me the only sort of co-operation which is of the least value to a journalist; they have left me severely alone. I must often have given vent to opinions which were personally poisonous to them, but my stuff went in.

It is important that the public should realize facts like these. Much mud has been thrown at the lords of the press; they are represented as bigots and tyrants, cracking the whip over their literary lackeys who — in their turn — are pictured as prostituting their talents for gold. That is bunkum. The lords of the press are not dictators; if they tried to play that role they would soon topple from their thrones. There is more of the artist than the autocrat in a great newspaper proprietor; he must have an ear that is exquisitely sensitive to the murmur of the crowd, but at the same time he must march to his own rhythm. His task is a constant and delicate harmonization of the voice of the masses with the voice of his own conscience. The British press, which is the creation of a few men of genius, is, in my opinion, a pretty comforting thing to have about the house. In the narrowing corridors of European civilization, it is like a loose-limbed, lusty giant — loud-mouthed maybe, at times, but always in the cause of liberty.

### § III

I have not forgotten *News of England*, to which we shall revert in a moment. But the savour of Fleet Street which has drifted into the last few paragraphs — the acrid tang of fresh ink and damp proof-sheets and stale tobacco smoke — has gone to my head, as it always goes to the head of the ex-reporter. So perhaps we may linger for a few minutes in the offices of the *Sunday Chronicle*.

Throughout the years in which I wrote for this paper I had a large correspondence. Most of the people who confided in me were working folk from the North and the Midlands. They

expressed themselves frankly, as man to man, without any frills or compliments; sometimes they were angry, and shouted that I didn't know what I was talking about, which may well have been the case; but always they gave me the credit of sincerity. They were right. If one thing is certain in journalism, it is that the only way to write is to write from the heart. If you are not yourself you are nobody. Doubtless a slick craftsman, for a brief period, can assume an alien personality, can force a regular output of crocodile tears, and work himself up into a finely faked frenzy. But to act a part month after month, year after year, to an audience of the shrewdest people in the world — that is out of the question. I decided, when I agreed to write this weekly page, that the only way to do it was to say exactly what I felt, even if I didn't know why I felt it, and even if it was flatly opposed to what everybody else was feeling. Sometimes the convictions of one year differed from those of the next, and any man who cared to undertake the thankless task of going through the files of the *Chronicle* over a long period, could collect a pretty bundle of apparent inconsistencies. I say 'apparent' because, on one thing, I never compromised. This was my basic conviction that the ultimate, and indeed the only sin in social relationships is cruelty, in one form or another. Cruelty has always been, to me, the ultimate yardstick by which to measure human behaviour. It is a yardstick that works both ways, for a number of human activities which the world has labelled as 'sinful' are to me innocuous, because they cause nobody pain. And I believe that unless a man causes pain to others he is unlikely to cause pain to God.

At a conservative estimate I received, during these years, some tens of thousands of letters from readers of the newspaper. I mention this because so extensive and prolonged a correspondence must reflect, in some degree, the mentality of a cross-section of the nation. It was a mentality that increasingly disturbed me. As the decade drew towards its close there was an appalling apathy in the air. People were as kindly as ever, and as quick to react to personal stories — if you told them a tale of the under-dog, as an individual, or if you spun them a

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yarn about some girl lying sick in a narrow bed, a sackful of generous letters was your reward. But to general causes they remained inert.

A trivial example will illustrate this point. Like most men who had more than a passing interest in the threatened beauties of the English scene, I was dismayed by the manner in which we were throwing away our heritage with both hands. One day I chanced upon an example of such outrageous vandalism that I thought at last I had found a cause which would gain what the journalists call 'nation-wide support'. I happened to find myself in Lincoln, where I had gone to study a new scheme of unemployment relief. Towards dusk, my work completed, I climbed the steep hill to the cathedral, which is one of the most richly beautiful buildings, not only in our country but in the world. It was too late to go into the cathedral that night, so I prowled round the outside, sniffing the keen air, gazing up to those great cliffs of stone, and beyond them to the deep, dark bosom of the sky, on which the first diamonds were sparkling.

Feeling a better man, I walked away, passed under the great Gothic gate, and turned into a charming little square of pure Georgian houses. How right it was — this delicate cluster of domestic architecture, so sedate, so demure, pursing its lips, as it were, in the shadow of the great frowning Cathedral! How subtle the contrast, how completely and deliciously English!

And then, I found myself face to face with a staring placard, that hung over a slender portico through which Jane Austen might have passed. It was floodlit, and in letters of glaring orange it announced:

THIS DESIRABLE FREEHOLD SITE  
FOR SALE  
SUITABLE FOR THE ERECTION OF  
A CINEMA, ETC.

The situation had the blatancy of a vulgar cartoon. It seemed to sum up in a few brutal lines the malady of the century, and in particular the malady of England, flaunting the faith of her fathers, cocking a snook at all that had made her great. I went

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home and wrote a page at white heat. It was an effective piece of journalism; and it was a great cause; I was confident that there would be a rousing response.

On the following Tuesday I went round to Kemsley House with a feeling of special anticipation; I had a vision of scores of indignant letters — cheques, maybe, to start a crusade. When I opened the door the office-boy sprang to his feet with a grin. ‘Well, sir, you’ve certainly rung the bell this week!’ He pointed to a table which was piled high with letters, all addressed to me. It looked like a record mail. Delighted, I chose a letter at random and tore it open. As I read, I was bewildered; it was all about my dog, who had died a few days before. I threw down the letter, and picked up another. It was in the same strain, and was entirely devoted to the death of my dog. And the next . . . and the next . . . indeed, the whole pile. Jimmy Drawbell had put in a few lines at the bottom of a back page about my dog, and this was the result. But not one out of a million readers had thought it worth while to comment on the supreme sacrilege to which I had devoted the whole of a page.

It seemed significant.

### § I V

I did not give up. The muddled, hysterical pages of *News of England* afford ample evidence of my ferment at that time.

Shortly after the Lincoln episode I went down the distressed areas in Wales. Like many other people, I had been stirred by the Duke of Windsor’s visit to our national slum, and by his simple words: ‘Something must be done.’ That statement was neither erudite nor elegant, but it came from the heart, and in its odd way — like a clumsy but spontaneous gesture to a crowd — it rang true.

Wales plunged me into a pit of despair; it was like descending into hell. I loathe pain, discomfort, smells, and all the appurtenances of poverty, but I have certain standards of professional honesty, and I could not have told the story of these forgotten people if I had not myself attempted to live it.

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I have no fondness for journalists who write sob-stuff from the stalls.

So I stayed with a Welsh miner and his wife and family. He had been disabled in a pit accident and not long afterwards he died of his wounds. They were sensitive, charming people, and over their grim lives there was a flicker of poetry. Sitting in their tiny parlour — for they were comparatively prosperous — I used to long for a magic wand, to touch the bleak hillside that loomed outside with even a speck of gold. But there was no gold in sight, not even black gold. Most of the pits were closed; the thin, grey streets were deserted; and over most of the shop-windows was plastered an agent's notice, announcing that this 'desirable' business was to let.

I prowled round like an unhappy ghost. I went down pits, came up breathless and mucky, swore that nothing could ever induce me to repeat the experience, and then, next day, plunged down once more. The mines had a morbid fascination; there was the ring of doom in them, and the scent of death. The Edgar Allan Poe complex in me, which is always latent, was allured by the fantastic creatures who moved in the bowels of the earth — not only by the men themselves, but by the strange and spotless cats that wandered elegantly into the dim-lit distances, and in particular by the white cockroaches — like flaccid, mobile moonstones — that slid over the coal, pallid, obscene, omnipresent.

But the starkest tragedies occurred above.

In Ynyscynon I saw a man die in full view of the village street, merely because the shabby curtains that should have shielded him had long ago been pawned to buy food. It was a warm evening, and he had been moved close to the window because he was gasping for breath — he had tuberculosis and double pneumonia. People passing by peered in at him, shaking their heads or shrugging their shoulders according to their temperaments.

I forced myself to follow my companion into that room, and to join the little family crowd that clustered round the bedside. I wanted the scene to be stamped firmly on my mind, to hang

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for ever in my brain as a living picture whenever I found myself arguing, in the future, about economics or social conditions. Not that it was an episode that was likely to be lightly forgotten. There were eight people standing round that bedside and I seem to see them all drawn in straight vertical lines of black, their heads drooping, their hands hanging loosely by their sides, staring in silence at the writhing figure before them. Of the eight people in that room, three were children; one of them, about eight years old, had just run in from school. He took his stand by the bedside, folding his arms in their ragged sleeves, and every time his father cried out in agony: 'Oh God! Oh God!' the little boy blinked nervously and his shoulders gave a sort of shell-shocked twitch. For this business had been going on for some weeks and the tiny sitting-room was the family's sole accommodation.

It was the publicity of it all that was so appalling. Always, just outside in the gathering dusk, so near that if he had been able to lift his hand the dying man could have touched them, passed the strangers of the street, and most of them paused and peered in, as though at a side-show. And all for the lack of a pitiable pair of serge curtains! It was a situation worthy of Zola, and the only thing which saved it from being quite unbearable was the sense one had of companionship with those same strangers; one felt that they were not merely curious, they understood, they were fellow-mourners in their strange, mute way; they were all in the same rotten, filthy, rapidly sinking boat.

### § v

Some of the *Chronicle* articles during this Welsh interlude were far from popular. Letters began to arrive at the office suggesting that I was going 'red' and that it would be better to leave the discussion of technical matters, like coal-mining, to the 'experts'. All widely read journalists have probably had a similar experience; those mythical 'experts' are constantly being conjured up before us, pointing their ghostly fingers of

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scorn; indeed, good journalism might be described as a constant battle between the photographic mind of the reporter and the academic mind of the 'expert'.

As far as I was concerned, I didn't want to go 'red', I wanted other people to *see* red. It was revolting to hear people talk so glibly of the 'cancer of unemployment'; this terrible word had become only a cliché to them. It no longer suggested, as it should have done, the sharp pain in the vitals, the gnawing away of the bodily fibres, the final lingering death.

The metaphor came vividly to life at Penycraig in the Rhondda Valley. Here the descent into hell became precipitous. I had lived, by most standards, a fairly luxurious life, even if the luxuries had been paid for by hard and unremitting work. And now, to find oneself in this loathesome pit. . . .

One of the figures which remains most clearly in my memory was a boy of fifteen to whom I talked outside a hideous building which houses the Labour Club at Penycraig. He had the tragic face and the wasted frame of one of Picasso's *saltimbancos*, but there was none of the golden fire in his eyes, which had never looked on anything but decay and slow death. He was a problem child.

'What is the matter with him?' I asked his teacher, who was standing by my side.

'The same thing that's the matter with dozens of his mates. When they've nothing to do, they just go to bed and stay there.'

'But why?'

'Supposing you'd seen *your* father stay in bed till noon, year after year, simply because he had no reason to get up, and supposing you knew that he was probably doing the best for all concerned, because he was saving a precious meal and keeping warm without using up any coal — well, you wouldn't be asking why.'

This seemed to me one of the most terrible indictments of our society that I had ever heard. Even in their holiday camps these boys, instead of playing in the fields, or climbing up the cliffs or wandering through the woods, slunk off quietly by themselves, lay down on their camp-beds and stared up at the



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canvas. I wonder what was in their minds — what shape was being taken by the long, long thoughts of this abandoned generation. I suppose the answer came in the Socialist triumph of 1946. Some people were astonished by the extent of that triumph. They should not have been, for it was being prepared through all those wasted years, in the deserted valleys where we had left our fellow men with nothing but their dreams. And the dreams were bitter.

### § V I

My experiences in Wales were repeated on an even grimmer scale in Scotland. One day, without any particular reason except a pricking of the conscience, I packed a handbag and jumped on a train to Glasgow. I had a crazy notion of living in a slum for three months on twenty-three shillings a week.

I stuck it for exactly ten days. It was a humiliating experience, which reflects no sort of credit on me. The only thing in my favour is that I did actually live on twenty-three shillings a week; i.e. my total expenditure over the period was thirty shillings.

One lesson I learnt, even in this short time — the extreme importance of *pennies* to the very poor. Twenty-three shillings a week is just over three and threepence a day — the sort of sum one used to leave on the plate as a tip after a moderate luncheon at a restaurant. If you have only three and threepence a day you have to count not only pennies but halfpennies.

I stayed in a hostel of Hogarthian squalor, for which the fee was a shilling a night. The smells were the worst part — no, the snores — no, the cockroaches — no, the blankets . . . anyway, the whole thing was hellish. As it would have created a dim impression among my neighbours to retire in the pair of pale pink silk pyjamas which was all I happened to have handy, I used to go to bed, like the rest of them, in a shirt and trousers, and crouch under those fiendish blankets, holding a handkerchief to my nose, and thinking that men without money are really much better dead. All adult humans, as such, are pretty

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nasty in a physical sense — they only become pleasant with the assistance of soap, scissors, razors, dentists, and all the expensive apparatus of civilization. This is not a very original discovery, but it has yet to be learned by quite a number of the well-to-do.

I had reached, in my middle thirties, the same state of wisdom as any serious reformer reaches in his teens. Poverty was now an occasion for anger rather than pity. For it is only when anger enters a man's heart, to sweep away all traces of polite regret, that history is made.

I made no history; I did not even write a decent article; I was in too much of a pother about this extraordinary problem of the pennies. After I had paid my shilling for the hostel — (how odd it seemed not to be able to tip the one-eyed monster, an ex-sailor, who guarded the entrance, with its cracked glass door) — I had twenty-seven pennies left with which to feed myself, amuse myself and improve my mind. God alone knows what I should have done if, in addition, like a genuinely poor person, I had been obliged to set aside something for clothes and insurance! After paying for breakfast — five pennies for a cup of coffee and a very unpleasant sort of cake — twenty-two pennies remained. One could hardly lunch on less than tenpence — which meant a shilling for everything else — dinner, drinks, books, transport, etc.

I could not afford a penny for a newspaper, so I had to go to the nearest public library which was about a mile and a half away. And as I could not afford a penny for a tram, I had to trudge through the streets in the rain. I was in a state of screaming nervous depression all the time because, needless to say, I could not afford a penny for a smoke, and until this lunatic adventure began I had been smoking forty cigarettes a day. Arrived at the public library I used to hang about the newspaper stands with the other down-and-outs, who gave me hostile glances because, though I was wearing a very old suit, it looked 'ritzzy' enough compared with their own scarecrow garments.

All the same, I made friends, of whom the pleasantest were called Sam and Andrew Macrae. They were, of course, on the

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dole, and so was their father, an ex-merchant navy man. They took me to their home, a couple of rooms in a tenement house. Three things stand out most clearly from that visit. Firstly, there was only one lavatory for eight families. Most of the families were large, and the lavatory was situated on a precipitous stone staircase. It was a foul arrangement, in every sense of the word, particularly for the old and feeble, and for the women who had babies coming. I apologize for mentioning these unsavoury details, but they haunted me; they are just another example of the fact that money, in our highly industrialized society, is the only shield men have against the horror of their own bodies. In primitive communities, where there is the blessing of the sun and the screen of the jungle, it does not matter so much.

The second thing which stands out in my memory is a remarkable sort of bunk, let into the wall, in which the two boys slept. The father and mother slept on a day bed in the sitting-room; where the sister slept I cannot imagine — presumably on the floor. But the bunk was the thing which fascinated me. It seemed about the size of a cabin trunk, and the ‘ceiling’ was only two feet above the mattress. Yet it was the nightly resting place of two six-footers.

Thirdly — the father’s eyes. They had the sea in them, but it was an empty sea, with never the flick of a sail. He had given up hope. ‘Come on Dad — get up — rouse yourself!’ they used to say to him every hour or so. But he hardly seemed to hear them. He sat listlessly in an old chair, staring at the grey square of the window. ‘He hasn’t been out to look for work for nearly a year,’ whispered his wife. ‘He used to tramp the streets every day, looking for something. One night he came home and said: “They’ve broken my heart.” And he’s been sitting there ever since.’

I might have stuck out my three months if I had been physically stronger. But sleep in that hostel was impossible, and anybody who has had even three days of real insomnia will agree that by the end of it one is not far removed from insanity. After a week I was in that condition. The last three days remain

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as a nightmare memory of hunger, drab streets in the rain, screaming trams, long hours standing up, reading the newspapers in the public library, unable to understand the print because my nerves were craving for a cigarette.

The end of this farce came quite suddenly. I stepped out into the street, saw a taxi speeding towards me — a comparatively rare sight in this impoverished district — hailed it, and drove to the hotel. It was not an establishment that would normally fill me with awe, but when I reached it I hovered outside for several minutes, not daring to go inside. My brief sojourn with the down-and-outs had infected me with some of their tragic diffidence. That, I suppose, was another lesson I had learnt — the lesson that in great cities there is a sort of invisible wall dividing the rich from the very poor, a wall that is not made of bricks and mortar, but of intimidation — even if the intimidation is unconscious.

At length, I pushed through the swing doors and stared around me in a sort of daze. There were marble pillars; there were soft lights; there were men and women who were clean and bathed, and not hungry. Doubtless the pillars were pretentious, and the people were provincial, but at that moment I felt like a beggar in paradise.

A page-boy came up and took my bag. I walked over to the reception office and signed my name. Whereupon I was wafted to the elevator and conducted to my room.

And then — the satisfaction of the senses! The boiling water from the fat nickel taps in the bath, the huge towels, the opulence of the marble slabs that surrounded the wash basin. The sheen on the satin counterpane — an eyesore, if ever there was one, but at that moment an object of transcendent beauty. And the lovely feeling of power as one lifted the telephone and ordered dinner in bed.

But I had a few lingering traits of self-respect. Before I ordered my own dinner I sent for a special messenger and dispatched a little present to the Macraes. As I addressed the envelope I felt that I was sending a letter to hell — as indeed I was.

## CHAPTER XII

### RED AND GREY

THE obvious development of these somewhat dilettante excursions into the waste lands would have been to turn Socialist. Lord knows, I'd been practically everything else in my time. That is the worst of having a temperament which is easily swayed and easily fooled. As you go through life your sense of pity constantly urges you to spring up on all sorts of surprising platforms, making unprepared speeches, with the most awkward results.

But I did not go Socialist. It was the Socialists themselves who prevented me from doing so — or perhaps I should say the pseudo-Socialists. At about this time I happened to be meeting quite a number of the more gilded variety of these people, and it made me impatient to observe the manner in which they were planning the revolution from the Ritz. With some of them it did not seem to matter so much; when Lady Lavery had decorated her luncheon-table with red carnations and bought a red velvet hat for twenty guineas, under the fond impression that she thereby symbolized some sort of revolt against capitalism — an institution which constantly supplied her husband with 2000 guineas for indifferent portraits of millionaires — one shrugged one's shoulders and said: 'If it amuses Hazel, let her get on with it. She's gay and generous and drenchingly beautiful and if she likes to order a few streamlined tumbrils from Rolls she can well afford it.'

But there were others who had not Hazel's charm. True, one could forgive a man like Oliver Baldwin — now, somewhat incongruously, an Earl. Although the prosperous name of Baldwin is not usually associated with a corresponding richness of the mind, Oliver was at least sincere. A Baldwin — whatever else one may say against him — always means well. Oliver has always meant well, and the Socialist party, recognizing this fact, has rewarded his thirty years' devotion to their cause

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by elevating him to the governorship of the distant Leeward Islands.

One could forgive, too, such parlour revolutionaries as Lord and Lady Hastings. They gave me an impression of being choked at birth by an excess of silver spoons. Lady Hastings's mother was the famous Marchesa Casati — a delicious baroque creature who might have been invented by Ronald Firbank in one of his more extravagant moments. She had an orchidaceous beauty which was immortalized by Augustus John, and she used to give parties in Venice where parakeets screamed from gilded trees. Her eyelids hung heavy with paint; she was witty, she was lovable, she was outrageous. But she was not, in my opinion, a suitable mother for a Socialist — particularly as Christina Hastings inherited no small part of her charming qualities.

With some of these people I had the feeling that Socialism was a form of interior decoration. 'I'm bored with blue — let's go in for red. I'm sick of Queen Anne — let's have a spot of Regency. Let's do up the music-room, let's do up our politics.' That sort of thing.

However, I believe that such people as I have mentioned, though they were lightweights, intellectually, were well-intentioned. They had kind hearts as well as coronets, and simple faith as well as Norman blood. (Not that the blood of all of them was as blue as all that.)

But there were others who were quite intolerable. Only the law of libel prevents me from naming the hostess who, in my presence, berated her butler because he had spilt the champagne cocktails on the only copy of the *Daily Worker*, thereby rendering illegible the leading article in that organ, which may be described as the first of the English comics. And were it not for that same law of libel I could print a pretty list of men and women, politically prominent today, whose public protestations of Socialism are delivered from a background of grotesque and obviously illegal luxury. I don't understand these people; I don't get the point; I have an obstinate conviction that a man's private life should reflect, in some faintly recognizable degree,

the principles which he most loudly professes. If, for example, one were to encounter an ardent prohibitionist who fortified himself before every public meeting with half a bottle of Moët '35, would one not be justified in questioning his protestations that he was only living for the day when the last cork was drawn, and when we should all draw our inspiration from the bathroom tap? It is the same with such subtle matters as child psychology, on which the most impassioned pronouncements are usually made by rigid spinsters. Surely, if you are going to talk sensibly about babies you should at least have made an occasional effort to have one; and if you are going to talk sensibly about adolescence you should have gone through some of the rough and tumble of family life, when you would realize that the burgeoning of the infant ego is sometimes forgotten — and rightly forgotten — in the more urgent matters of wiping noses, washing necks and telling the infant in question to stop that damned row.

This elemental connection between principle and practice is blatantly flouted by the Mayfair Socialists. Their championship of the 'workers' does not prevent them, for example, from being rude to waiters and grossly inconsiderate to servants. I shall never forget a flaming row that I once had with a very rich woman who drove me to a Socialist meeting barely half a mile from her house behind Belgrave Square. It was a fine spring evening; it would have been pleasant to walk home through the quiet streets; and after the meeting had been going on for an hour I asked her if she would like me to go out and tell her chauffeur that he could go home. She was highly offended. It might rain. She might think of some orders she had forgotten to give him. She might want to go on somewhere else. And so, for another two hours, a healthy, ardent young man remained chained in the street outside, encased in a stuffy uniform, when he ought to have been making love in the park. When at last we emerged from the hall, satiated with statistics about communal farms and collective nurseries, and dazed by poems whose writers had hymned the feminine charms of tractors, cranes and hydraulic lifts, my hostess with a bland smile, turned to the chauffeur and

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said: 'I think we will walk, James, after all—you can go home now.'

It was then that the row began. It lasted quite long, and it waxed quite loud, and I do not regret a single one of the rude epithets which I threw into that lady's face. Particularly as the whole episode gave me an idea for an article which I published a few days later under the title, 'Keeping the Chauffeur Waiting'. When the article was published, it drew a letter from that prince of journalists, Arnold Bennett, written in his superbly elegant script. I make no apology for quoting him. He wrote:

With a single phrase, you have nailed a whole class to the specimen board. I am out of patience with those people who prate about their principles while neglecting the simplest rules of common kindness. I hope and believe that I don't keep chauffeurs waiting. But in future, in case I forget, I shall always tie a knot in my napkin.

### § 11

Occasionally the Socialist ferment, acting on a mind that is sensitive and alert, produces a gay and bubbling figure like Lord Faringdon. He is one of the party's most energetic hosts; he has drunk many a champagne cocktail to the downfall of the upper classes, and though the red flag does not actually fly over the ramparts of his house at Buscot—a stately home, if ever there was one—the sentiments that echo through that imposing pile, on the week-ends when he is entertaining his buddies of the extreme left, are decidedly revolutionary.

One cannot help liking Gavin Faringdon; he has a lively, well-stored brain; it is pretty certain that he believes what he says; and he has shown considerable courage in espousing causes which have brought upon him the concentrated abuse of those ruling classes to which, by right, he belongs. If it would not be true to say that he was born to the purple, he was at least born to a fairly vigorous shade of mauve, and during his early years he showed every sign of living life in terms of this



colour. He was one of the brightest of the bright in the 'Dance, Dance, Dance Little Lady' period; as an undergraduate he was of the breed that climbs statues in order to place on their heads objects which are usually reserved for the shadows of the bed-chamber; as a bridegroom he literally set the Thames on fire — pouring immense quantities of petrol on the river in its upper reaches at Maidenhead, the night before his wedding. So something — as they say — was to be expected of him.

But what has actually occurred is not at all what I, personally, should have expected. If he had followed in the footsteps of William Beckford, and toured Europe with chefs and valets and a private orchestra, as he could have well afforded, one would not have raised an eyebrow. If he had founded a twentieth-century edition of the Hell Fire Club, and sat in a tower, drinking till dawn and gambling his shirt away, one would have said: 'Well, after all, he had it coming to him.' Even if he had renounced the world and retired into a monastery, it would have been a role that one could have accepted without cavilling.

But nothing like this has transpired. Instead, one has the strange prospect of Gavin, still very much the lord of the manor, still very much a connoisseur of good claret, and still fully, and to my mind, rightly, appreciative of the good things of this world, playing host to people whose main object in life — (if one is to believe their own statements) — is to strangle lords of the manor in the nearest ditch.

Buscot is certainly a very agreeable place from which to plan the destruction of the rich. It is a lovely Georgian building, which Gavin inherited, together with a substantial fortune, from his father, and he had spent a great deal of money in adding those amenities which the *Daily Worker* always uses, as theatrical properties, when it wishes to portray the life of the brutal rich. Before the war there was a private theatre, a swimming pool of the most elegant proportions, long avenues flanked with statues — there was, in fact, quite enough to make an old-fashioned revolutionary bare his teeth and mutter: 'Let's throw a bomb at it.'

But the new-style revolutionaries harboured no such desire;

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they were far too comfortable enjoying Gavin's hospitality. On the only 'party' occasion when I visited Buscot, the other guests were all extremely 'left'. There was Lady Hastings, wearing the most delicious clothes, looking as frail as a freesia, and hoarsely demanding immediate intervention on the side of the Reds in Spain. There was Susan Lawrence — who was later to attain cabinet rank in the Labour Government — drawing blood-curdling pictures of British rule in India, and prophesying an 'Indian Renaissance', complete with lilies, lotuses, temples and indoor sanitation, as soon as the last British Tommy had been ejected. There was young Rudolf Messel, telling us, as he tapped a Cartier cigarette case with a Turkish cigarette, of the amazing strides which the Soviets were making in industry. When I asked him if they had yet turned out anything to equal his own motor-car, which was an American importation of quite staggering opulence, he seemed to regard the question as in bad taste.

There was also that grand little woman Ellen Wilkinson, who was later destined to be Minister of Education. Ellen was always a fierce fighter for her cause, but as I watched her homespun figure sitting in the huge hall with its softly shaded lights, after a dinner which did the greatest credit to Gavin's cook, I could not help recalling a theme which she had developed to me, some years before, when we had been having tea together in the House of Commons. 'The Lady,' she had then proclaimed, with some vehemence, 'is too expensive a product to maintain in a falling Empire.' Not any particular lady, but *the* Lady, as such, with a capital 'L'. The things she had said against Ladies were nobody's business. She had compared them to tigresses, who would fight for their comforts as animals fight for their young. She had drawn a shattering picture of them prowling about their beautiful rooms, gnashing their teeth against the poor. Worst of all, said Miss Wilkinson, they refused to listen to her when she told them the 'facts' about her beloved Russians. (If anybody thinks that I am exaggerating Miss Wilkinson's diatribes of hatred against the Lady, I shall be delighted to produce documentary proof of them.)

## RED AND GREY

But now — what had happened? Here she was, in these very surroundings which she so deplored, among people who were reputedly ‘ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’, but she showed no signs of embarrassment. Was not Lady Hastings a Lady? She certainly gave every appearance of being such. She had the clothes, she had the make-up, she had the accent; and as far as one could gather she was in no immediate danger of being compelled to seek remunerative employment. And what about Baroness Budberg, another of the guests? She was a Lady, if ever there was one: even if you first encountered her kneeling on the steps with a scrubbing brush, you would have been in no doubt about her quality. Had these Ladies suddenly become Women because of their advanced views? Were you a Lady if you approved of Franco, and did you only become a Woman if you approved of Stalin? When, in fact, was a Lady not a Lady, and why? It was all very confusing, and to this day I have not found the answer.

The grandest thing at Buscot was the house telephone list, which lay on every bedside table. I should have thought that it would have sent any Socialist howling out of the house in rage, for of all the documents of this nature I have ever encountered it was by far the most impressive. It seemed interminable, beginning with ‘Number 1 — His Lordship’s Bedroom’, and trailing through a long list of guest rooms, servant’s rooms, pantries and the like, to end up in a blaze of glory at ‘Number 27 — Theatre, Number 28 — Swimming Pool.’

I happened to be accompanied for this week-end by a young and irreverent friend on whom this telephone list had a deplorable effect. It was very late when we went to bed, and just as I was falling asleep the bell rang. It was my friend, ringing up from the next room.

‘I just wanted to see if it worked,’ he said demurely.

I snapped back that I hoped his boyish curiosity was now satisfied, and turned over to go to sleep again.

Another ring. I grabbed the receiver. ‘What the hell . . . ?’

His voice echoed down the line. ‘I say, let’s ring a few people up.’

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I was about to observe that it was nearly 3 a.m., when he burst into the room in person, clad in an outrageous dressing-gown, and waving the list over his head.

'At least,' he cried, 'let's ring up the swimming pool.'

So we rang up the swimming pool. I had an odd *frisson* as I listened to the buzz . . . buzz . . . buzz. I thought of the silver bell ringing out its insane summons to the icy water in its marble cage, down in the garden far below.

'Supposing somebody answers?'

'Is it likely?'

'Well — some of these girls look pretty tough. For all we know they may be snorting about in the deep end at this moment. . . .'

'Throwing rubber elephants at each other. . . .'

'Or thinking out the next serial for the Worker's Whatnot.'

'Cyril,' I said coldly, 'I should never have brought you to this house.'

'Of course you shouldn't. I'm not a Worker. I'm only a six-pound-a-week actor, in debt to my dentist.'

'In that case, the sooner you join the party the better. You heard what they said about the Position of the Artist in the New Regime.'

'Hell to all that!' said Cyril. It seemed an apt comment.

Nobody could be more conscious than I am that all this is in what is known as Bad Taste. One should not write scathing things about one's friends. But my only friend, in the aforementioned *galère*, is Gavin, and I don't think that I *have* written anything scathing about him. It was not his fault that he inherited a fortune and a title. It was not his fault that he acquired convictions that are at variance with that inheritance. If I felt that he was insincere, that he was playing a role merely to gain a spurious importance — that would be a different matter. But he is blazingly sincere. And, in his queer, erratic way, extremely intelligent.

All the same, if I ever went Red myself, I have a strong suspicion that a setting like Buscot would cramp my style.

## § III

So here I was, with the drift to war gaining daily pace, with the country divided and distraught — and I was completely out of step with everybody and everything. Needless to say, my reasons for not joining the Socialist camp were more substantial than those which I have indicated above; they were due to a very clear realization of the fact that only death and starvation would — and will — result from any attempt to extend the control of bureaucracy over our economy, which is, of course, more precariously poised than the economy of any other country in the world. Apart from this, I was increasingly impatient with the refusal of the Socialists to realize the necessity for rearmament. It was a hellish position for an ex-pacifist — using the prefix 'ex-' to indicate a change of technique rather than of conviction. I still felt that almost anything was better than war — and the last ten years have not mitigated that conclusion. I was still haunted by the image of the mangled soldier, which was now being joined by equally vivid images of mangled civilians. But if war was to come, which seemed almost inevitable, we might as well be prepared for it — to that dull, despairing platitude had I been reduced.

To think otherwise was so damned muddle-headed. On the last page of that bad book *News of England* I had written:

I am not hopeless of our future. But I am profoundly anxious of it. We have genius, but it is dissipated in vain excursions. We have kindness — but without strength, of what can our kindness avail? We are realists, but we are caught in a curious miasma. A nation of shopkeepers, we have lost our capacity to add up a bill, and we have forgotten that one day we must render an account.

Churchill was saying the same sort of thing — rather better. Maybe it was not surprising that if nobody listened to him, nobody would listen to me.

All the same, I did not despair. I still clung to the grotesque illusion that an individual could do something about it. Old

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George Lansbury — that prince of pacifists, who, if there is an old-fashioned heaven, must be sitting on the woolliest of clouds, almost smothered by adoring lambs — had the same illusion. He was panting round Europe at that very moment, dispensing delicately measured draughts of the milk of human kindness to the dictators — who promptly threw it back in his face. On a minor scale I was doing the same thing.

I had already joined the Anglo-German Fellowship, but most of the members whom I encountered seemed to me to be on the wrong tack; many of them, if not actually anti-Semitic, had very disturbing opinions about the Jews. They would say: 'Of course, you know, the *German* Jews are not at all like ours; they're really impossible — dreadful creatures that deserve all they get.' In justice to such people one must grant that they probably did not realize — any more than the rest of us — the true nature of the persecution that was to reach its logical conclusion in the cesspools of Belsen and Dachau; even so, it was sickening to hear educated people talking such ugly nonsense, as though the German Jews were a sort of animal species with horns and tails. Other members of the Fellowship had evidently been infected by the German '*mystique*'; the bogus word 'Nordic' was constantly cropping up in their conversation; some of them even so far lost their sense of humour as to refer to Hitler as 'the Leader'.

I decided to fly for higher game. One of my contacts was Prince Otto Bismarck, the grandson of the Iron Chancellor. At that time he was first secretary of the German Embassy. Intellectually a light-weight, he had a great name and — so I understood — the confidence of Hitler. Apart from that he seemed an agreeable young man, rather solemn, but full of amiable inclinations towards an Anglo-German entente. He dressed with the sort of super-British correctitude that is normally only encountered in American advertisements.

Had I known that at the very moment when I tackled him he was casting a cold and calculating eye over the various stately homes of England, in order to choose the one he would commandeer after the invasion of England, I might not have been

so blue-eyed about the whole business.<sup>1</sup> However, I had no such suspicions, and even if I had, I should probably have dismissed them as unworthy. Unless one believed in the inevitability of war, one was obliged to believe in the tractability of the Germans. It was a case of *credo quia impossibile*. Between these two beliefs one *had* to choose; there was no escape; and like many others I chose the pleasanter, convinced that war would mean — as it probably has done — the death of European civilization.

So I got together with Bismarck, and all very silly it was, though I did not think so at the time. I was full of plans for transporting chunks of German Youth to England and chunks of English Youth to Germany, in the very Beverley notion that if only a sufficiently large quantity of sun-bronzed adolescents could be sent charging up and down the main thoroughfares, goodwill would result, and the hearts of the dictators would melt. (This sort of fatuous mentality animates all organizers of international youth movements, which have never done anybody good. The only interchange which takes place is an interchange of microbes.) I had an equally impractical idea of an exchange of writers and editors, and offered my own services, to go to Berlin and write about anything under the sun till I was black in the face, provided that at least one German journalist would do the same in London. Again, a grotesque conception, whose only excuse was that it sprang from a mood of desperation. I was not the only one to indulge such hopes. On a higher plane, and with somewhat more practical application, Lord Kemsley was vainly endeavouring to keep alive a journalistic 'bridge' between the two nations. In the face of general misrepresentation, on both sides of the water, he established contact with Dietrich, the Nazi press chief, with the generous and typically British proposal that there should be a mutual interchange of uncensored articles, at the highest level. Like all such schemes, it came to nothing.

<sup>1</sup> I understand from Sir Michael Duff that his own house, Vaynol Park, was finally ear-marked by the Prince as the most appropriate dwelling.

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My efforts with Bismarck were wrecked by his uncompromising stand on the Jewish question. Why this should have been a surprise to me, since anti-Semitism was the life-blood of the whole movement, I cannot understand; it only shows how far wishful thinking can mislead a man. I knew Bismarck only as a pleasant, reasonably cultured and outwardly kindly creature; I had played tennis with him, swapped after-dinner stories with him; it seemed inconceivable to me that he could fail to disapprove of the anti-Semitic ravings of his government. And so, it was almost casually, as one human being to another — as though there could be no possible argument about it — that I said to him: 'And, of course, the first article I should have to write, if I went over to Germany, would be one exposing the whole of this damned anti-Semitic racket.'

The suggestion had as much hope of success as if one had asked Lady Astor to sponsor a new brand of absinthe. But it was no more unreasonable than many other people's actions at that period, and it is on a par with a great many people's actions today. The people who are trying to appease Russia, to 'exchange ideas' with the Soviet and to pretend that Communism is anything other than a more poisonous and ruthless form of Nazi-ism, are acting with precisely the same ingenuousness.

Bismarck's face underwent a remarkable transformation when I mentioned the Jews. I can see him now, very clearly. We were sitting in a quiet corner of the Carlton Grill; we had talked so long and — as I fondly imagined — so fruitfully, that we were almost the last people left in the restaurant.

'The Jews?' It was like a ham actor in a film, the way his face changed. 'That is a plank in the platform that will never be changed.'

He suddenly became von Stroheim, in the familiar role of the swaggering Hun. All humour, all courtesy vanished. He delivered himself of a tirade that was all the more sinister because he kept his voice down, and occasionally relieved his vituperance with a mechanical von Stroheim smile.



## § IV

I was profoundly depressed. But instead of giving up, I redoubled my efforts. I bearded von Ribbentrop in the German Embassy. I had met him once before, at a luncheon, and I had been so anxious to spread goodwill that I had written a few quite flattering paragraphs about him in the press. It went rather against the grain to do this, but it seemed one of the rare occasions when one would be justified in departing from absolute accuracy in the service of a higher cause. However, whatever one might have said in public, somebody, I felt, should privately inform him that there were certain things one did not do in our country. For example, in spite of the public uproar which had arisen when he heil'd Hitler on his first presentation to the King, he was still heiling Hitler; I had seen him at it a few days before, in the St. James's Club, and with each heil he made an enemy. So I wrote to him asking to see him 'on a matter of some importance'.

His reply came by return of post, summoning me to tea at the Embassy on the following day. A trivial detail about this letter throws a light on the impossible boorishness of the man. It was hastily written in his own hand, and in the German script, which few Englishmen can read without great difficulty. It struck me as an example of aggression in the social sphere. However, it was only to be expected, for ever since Ribbentrop's arrival in London the invitations from the Embassy had all been printed in German. (There is a story that the Japanese Ambassador was so irritated by this departure from diplomatic precedent that he replied by inviting the Ribbentrops to dinner in Japanese.)

The interview that resulted from this letter was humiliating. As I entered the hall of the Embassy at Carlton House Terrace, I passed the figure of a girl who was standing with clasped hands before a portrait of Hitler, as though in prayer. She was hatless, very blonde and Nordic, and for a moment I thought she must be a Hitler *Mädchen* who had come to pay her respects. Then I recognized her as Unity Mitford, Lord Redesdale's daughter,

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whose misguided adoration of the Fuehrer was almost to lead her to her death. The expression of ecstasy on her face was embarrassing.

Ribbentrop received me with a 'Heil Hitler!'; I replied with a firm 'How d'you do?' Before I had time to say anything else he was off on a wild tirade against British journalists, playwrights and cartoonists. He pushed across the table a bulky volume of press-cuttings which he had evidently been sticking in with his own hands, because on his desk there was a bottle of Stickphast, a pair of scissors and a mutilated copy of the current *Evening Standard*, from which he had extracted Low's cartoon. He was so angry that he had stuck it in rather crooked, and he pointed to it with a trembling finger, crying: 'Look at it! Look at it! How can you expect the German people to overlook such insults?' Not waiting for an answer he turned back a few pages to another cartoon, this time from *Punch*. 'Look at it! Look at it! Calling the Fuehrer a murderer!' He was so angry that he looked as if he were going to have a stroke, and his mood seemed to communicate itself to his Chow dog, which was lying by the window with its head on its paws. It looked up at me and gave a long, low growl.

The moment was obviously not propitious for suggesting to His Excellency that he should curb himself of his habit of heiling Hitler in public places, so I steered the conversation towards the subject of the German colonies. The German colonial case had always seemed to me the strongest plank in the German platform. Any competent barrister, pleading that case in a British court of law, would have obtained a verdict for the plaintiff. He would have been able to call, as witnesses in Germany's favour, men as eminent as Cecil Rhodes and Teddy Roosevelt, who had both paid glowing and detailed tributes to Germany's efficiency and humanity in her African colonies. He would have been able to point out that Germany had acquired a large part of her empire by the comparatively respectable means of paying cash over the counter. He would certainly have stressed the fact that by the Treaty of Versailles these ex-German colonies, which most British people seemed to regard

as having passed to Britain by right of conquest, actually belonged to Britain no more than they belonged to Switzerland or Costa Rica. They were mandates held under the League of Nations — a body from which Germany had resigned, and which had already become as ghostly an executor as any of the legal phantoms which haunted the brain of Dickens.

Even if Germany's record, in this respect, had been less good, it was obvious that her acute shortage of certain raw materials would sooner or later compel her to seize by force what she could not obtain by negotiation.

Here then seemed a grain of hope. If Britain could make some sort of gesture over the colonial question, it might conceivably be the first faint gleam in a dawn of better relationships. I suggested as much to Ribbentrop. He asked me rather brusquely what *I* could do about it. 'You are a *Schriftsteller*,' he snapped — of which the best translation is a 'spinner of stories'. What could a *Schriftsteller* hope to achieve? I replied that a *Schriftsteller* could at least arrange a luncheon at which he might expound, as tactfully as possible, his views to a number of persons of influence. Again he snapped — what did I mean by 'tactfully'? By now I was beginning to feel less tactful myself; the sneer with which he had pronounced the word *Schriftsteller* had not been lost on me; besides, I did not think it correct for an ambassador to put his boots on the desk, almost in my face. So I did not elaborate on the theme of tact. I excused myself, saying that I would let His Excellency know when and where we should meet.

We met, eventually, at Claridges, about a fortnight later. By that time, the luncheon had got out of my hands; it had seemed better for me to play the role of guest, charged with the task of introducing the subject of the German colonies at any moment which seemed suitable.

It was an appalling occasion. I have described it in the foreword to one of my books of short stories.<sup>1</sup> The reader may forgive me if I quote the apposite passage. I was sitting next to Lady Chamberlain, with whom I was carrying on a rather

<sup>1</sup> *Men Do Not Weep*.

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desultory conversation, waiting to catch the eye of my hostess — whom we will call Mrs. X. Ribbentrop was on her right, and the French Ambassador on her left. And then. . . .

There was a bang, a shaking of the table, a rattle of glasses. Everybody looked up and stopped talking. It seemed that some waiter had dropped a tray. I could not see which waiter it was, nor if anything was spilt on anybody, and so — as I always feel much sorrier for the waiters than for the people they spill things on — I went on talking. So did Lady Chamberlain. There was a curious feeling that we were talking in space, and that everybody was waiting. She had just asked me some question (it was about rock gardens) when once again there was a bang, louder than ever. The table shook so much that the wine was spilt from my glass. And this time I saw what had happened. Ribbentrop had struck the table with his fist to command attention.

It was no polite tap, nothing on the lines of: 'Perhaps, if you would give me a moment of your attention.' It had the authentic ring of the mailed fist.

We all stared at him. I believe the whole restaurant stared at him. I shall never forget that moment — his angry, contemptuous eyes sweeping us into submission, and beside him poor Mrs. X, pink in the face and fluttering with agitation, trying to murmur something which she seemed incapable of saying. At last she got it out:

'I think,' she stammered, 'that His Excellency has something he would like to tell us about the German Colonial question.'

His Excellency had. And His Excellency did. For twenty long minutes Ribbentrop — at this private luncheon of friends, on a sunny morning with red roses in his honour — proceeded to lecture us as though we were raw recruits receiving musketry instruction from a drill sergeant. The sweet grew cold. The coffee was waved aside — by him. Not for one moment did he excuse himself,

there was never a 'by your leave' or a suggestion of seeking a second opinion. He did not ask, he demanded, in the rudest and most intolerable manner that made us all sound as if we were receivers of stolen goods.

I felt very near despair. 'You fool, you fool,' I wanted to cry, 'chucking it all away, turning friends into enemies, making it all impossible. If only you would stop ranting — if only I could speak for you.'

At last he finished. And without a further word he rose to his feet, clicked his heels, shook Mrs. X's hand with a grip that made her wince, and strode out of the room.

## § v

That luncheon almost finished me. There comes an end to the time when you can go on turning the other cheek to cads and bullies; you forget that you are a Christian — or perhaps, paradoxically, you remember it — and you feel you have to hit back. Which is, I suppose, a clumsy way of saying that pacifism can never work.

But it was not Ribbentrop who administered the *coup de grâce* to my efforts to co-operate with the Germans; it was the publisher of the German editions of my books. The incident is so trivial that I narrate it with diffidence. Its only importance is that it finally convinced me that Nazi-ism had in it the seeds of insanity.

Several of my books had been widely read in Germany, and among them was *Down the Garden Path*, which was published under the German title of *Grosse Liebe zu Kleinen Gärten*. This work, incidentally, was offered to the German public wrapped in a cover of staggering incongruity. Instead of Rex Whistler's charming and simple drawing, there was a coloured photograph of a palatial terraced garden with formal rosebeds, Gothic towers and Chinese pagodas. It was rather as though one had introduced an edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* with a frontispiece of Harrods.

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However, in spite of the pretentiousness of the outside, the contents were modest enough, concerned as they were with planning the herbaceous border, arranging mixed bunches and having tea with Mrs. M. Judge therefore of my astonishment, when one day I received a long and pompous letter from my German publishers informing me that they were about to publish a new edition of *Grosse Liebe zu Kleinen Gärten*, but that large proportions of it would have to be deleted from this edition, in view of the 'changed conditions of the Third Reich'. They went on to say that I would doubtless understand, after reading the passages in question, why they were 'atmospherically' unsuitable to the new generation of German readers. They enclosed a list of paragraphs which would have to come out — stretching in all to about 7000 words.

I studied this list with growing amazement. One of the characters in the book was a silly affected creature, entirely fictitious, whom I had called 'Undine Wilkins'. She had to come out, *in toto*. Not a whisper of her was allowed, not the faintest shadow of her frail form must fall across the pages. In God's name, why? A more chaste creature never breathed — nor a sillier. Was it suggested that the young women of Hitler's Reich would in some subtle way be corrupted by her? But even weirder than the ban on Miss Wilkins was the censorship of some of my own activities. For instance, there was a passage about going for a walk, in which I described the embarrassment one felt when approaching the village green, and running the gauntlet of the stares of the local youths, who always stopped talking and gaped as one passed. Should one say 'Hullo!' or 'Nice day, isn't it?'? Should one say nothing at all, and whistle to the dog? Everybody who has lived in a village has experienced these absurd moments. But it was too much, apparently, for the Third Reich. Out it had to come, with quantities of other innocuous trifles.

I wrote to the publishers intimating that I didn't very much care what they did to the book, providing that I got my royalties; I cherished no illusion that it was an immortal masterpiece of which every word was sacrosanct. But since I was mystified

by their action, would they kindly let me know what principles had guided them in their censorship?

Their reply was grimly illuminating. Here is the relevant part of it:

No such scenes as you have described on the village green could possibly be allowed in the New Germany. The youths whom you describe as standing in attitudes of indolence, at the end of every day, would be improving their bodies or their minds; for instance they might be working in their local *arbeitsdienst* or drilling under their local group-leader; at the very least they would be rambling in an orderly manner throughout the beautiful countryside. As for the character of Frau Wilkins, she is doubtless amusing, but in the New Germany such women are no longer encouraged. They are regarded as 'parasitical-decadents' and any author who draws such types in our country is nowadays required to show that he does so only in order to hold them up to contempt. We do not feel that you have done this in the case of Frau Wilkins, of whom, indeed, you seem occasionally almost to approve.

I certainly 'approved' of Miss Wilkins a great deal more after reading that letter than at any time when she had danced through my mind. I felt that I would like to sit down at once and write another book, all about her, discovering heroic qualities in her which had previously escaped my attention.

But I did not reply. What was the use? If that was the mentality of the New Germany, Miss Wilkins would soon be followed by the Professor and Mrs. M, and all the other kindly, harmless characters who had peopled its pages. And in the end the book would be stripped even of its flowers.

That letter was the final snub; after it I ceased my feeble, frantic efforts to help the cause of Anglo-German understanding. Like many others who had shed their illusions, I just sat back and hoped — very faintly — for the best.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A SHADOW LENGTHENS

IN Europe's deepening twilight all one's activities seemed futile, and I do not propose to bore the reader with anything but the briefest account of my own. I wrote the book, lyrics and music of a revue called 'Floodlight', which was produced at the Saville Theatre. Like most of my ventures in the theatre it made very little money, but at least it gave me a chance of hearing my own music played by a decent orchestra. Apart from this, my bookshelf tells me that I wrote a novel,<sup>1</sup> a book on London gardens,<sup>2</sup> another comedy, and a spate of stories and articles. There is no point in referring to them. It is more profitable to attempt to recapture the strange atmosphere of those post-Munich days. I seem to see my friends sharply silhouetted against the lowering background, like figures walking on the edge of a cliff, with thunder-clouds beyond, piling in from the sea.

One of these figures was Jan Masaryk. I had always a fondness for Jan; he was not a really intimate friend, but he was the sort of man with whom you found yourself instinctively linking arms. I made an excuse to go along to see him after Munich, with the vague idea that perhaps I could say or do something that might give him a grain of comfort. I found him sitting at his desk, staring moodily at a photograph of his father. There was a stiff whisky and soda by his side, and it was certainly not the first he had had. He wasn't drunk, for his capacity for whisky was very large, but he had taken enough to loosen his tongue. His bitterness was almost frightening, and strangely enough it seemed at that moment to be concentrated neither on Hitler nor on Chamberlain, but on the American Ambassador, Mr. Kennedy. This was due to a trivial incident that had occurred when Masaryk was walking home after listening to

<sup>1</sup> *Revue* (Jonathan Cape, 1939.)

<sup>2</sup> *Green Grows the City* (Jonathan Cape, 1939.)



Chamberlain's announcement of the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia.

'I walked home alone,' said Jan. 'I wanted to think, and I couldn't bear everybody staring at me to see how I was taking it. Just as I got into Belgrave Square, a big car drew up by my side. It was Kennedy. He looked out of the window with a broad grin on his face and shouted to me: "Well, Jan, this means that I'll be able to spend the winter at Palm Beach after all." I didn't know what to reply; it stabbed me.' Mr. Kennedy, Masaryk added, had the grace to look embarrassed when he realized the enormity of his *faux pas*; he made a gesture of atonement by sending Masaryk, that same night, a thousand dollars from his own pocket for Czech charities. Indeed, by comparison with most of his countrymen at this period, the Ambassador's behaviour was impeccable. For this was the time when Americans were in that traditional mood which — to the European — is most infuriating, the mood which prompts them to combine a ceaseless spate of moral injunction with a total negation of activity. If they had been putting a single American boy into khaki or teaching a single American pilot the elements of precision bombing, even for the defence of their own country, one would not have felt so badly about it. But they were not doing these things. They merely sat down, a long way off, safe behind the shield of the British navy, and sneered. It was not 'their finest hour'.

Nor, to be frank, was it our own. I can remember interminable conversations about the coming war, but neither I nor my friends seemed to be doing anything practical about it. Doubtless this was partly due to the unparalleled dullness of our leadership. When war actually broke out, one of the jobs assigned to me by the Ministry of Information was the task of writing a series of articles which would shed 'glamour' round the figures of the British Cabinet. It was an assignment that would have taxed the ingenuity of a Jules Verne, but I manfully struggled to fulfil it. I began with Neville Chamberlain, lunched with him at 10 Downing Street, and had a number of interviews with his pleasant wife. On two occasions I was given

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the run of his study when he was engaged elsewhere, and I used to prowl round the room, sniffing for some sign of 'glamour' as ardently as a terrier in search of a rat. Could one, for instance, make anything of his little bird platform, just outside the window, on which he used to sprinkle titbits every morning? Would the knowledge of this endearing habit cheer the heart of the nation? Would they gain fresh strength from the reflection that no matter how black the day Mr. Chamberlain's favourite starling would not go without its 'slice of bacon rind'? I thought not.

Then Mrs. Chamberlain would come in, and I would put her through a merciless cross-examination in the hope that something 'glamorous' would emerge. Nothing ever did. She adored him, but she made him sound as dull as he was. One day I heard that he took a cold bath every morning; perhaps one could do something about that? It was at least a vigorous habit. Perhaps it wasn't quite a match for Mussolini hopping through a flaming hoop, but it was *something*. So I said to her: 'I'd like to know all about Mr. Chamberlain's cold baths.'

She looked quite offended. 'Oh no,' she replied. 'It wouldn't be at *all* dignified.'

So that was that.

After Chamberlain I tried Simon. He was charming, and it is always a delight to follow the working of his brain, but try as I would, I couldn't turn him into a war leader. Hore-Belisha was better. He had colour and drive, and since he is himself a practised journalist he knew what attitude I wanted him to strike, and he struck it. The worst of all was Kingsley Wood. I have interviewed a number of dumb-bells in my life, from President Coolidge to the oldest inhabitant of Yugoslavia, but for sheer drabness nobody has equalled Kingsley Wood. His conversation was opiate; it stole over the senses, deadening the power of thought. After an hour with Kingsley Wood I went home and wrote to the Ministry that the job couldn't be done.

However, that is looking too far forward; the war has really no part in these pages, though its shadow lies heavily across

them. And in that shadow we merely sat and talked. Most of the conversations that I remember with any clarity took place on the little terrace outside the Hampstead house. We would sit in deck-chairs, sipping our brandy, listening to the wind in the old willow and the distant growl of the city . . . and always it was war, war, war. Here one night, for example, came H. G. Wells. It was an unfortunate occasion, for he was in a poisonous mood; his little eyes were red with hate, and it happened that his hatred was directed against the Church, which he seemed to regard as responsible for nearly everything.

'You and your Christianity,' he snarled at me. 'You and your bishops!'

'My bishops?'

'Your brother's a parson, isn't he? Doesn't he want to be a bishop?'

I had no idea if my brother wanted to be a bishop, and said so.

Wells then made a very offensive remark. He said: 'All bishops are bastards.' I remembered how, years before, he had used that same word in a much lighter and happier connection. We had been having tea together, in Whitehall Court, and suddenly, out of the blue, he said to me: 'What a pity it is that so many babies besmirch their own reputations by calling every man they meet "father".'

Perhaps I ought not to repeat this story about Wells, as at that time he was sick. He was a diabetic — his body was obviously poisoning his mind.

I shall never forget that night with Wells on the terrace because his hatred of the Church seemed almost pathological. He raved against the prayer-book, he tilted at the Thirty-Nine Articles, he discussed, brilliantly, the connection between the origins of Christianity and compared them with the origins of other world religions, always with a strongly phallic flavour. And with each new onslaught he found something new to say about his bishops. 'I feel affronted by their very existence,' he said. 'Why should a man with no intellectual capacity, no knowledge of world history, no moral principles except a

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collection of dingy superstitions — why should such a man think he can get up and tell *me*?

‘Tell you what?’

‘Tell me anything at all.’

Yet I liked Wells. I did not often see him, and even then it was usually on some tiresome official occasion, at the P.E.N. Club and such places, but he always squeaked a welcome in his high, soprano voice — surely the most inappropriate organ for a man of his virility? And he never failed, at my request, to recite for me my favourite passage from his works which, God knows, is apposite enough today. I can hear him now, as I heard him then, sitting on the little terrace, shrilly intoning that magnificent rhetoric from *The New Machiavelli*:

We do go on, we do get on. But when one thinks that people are living and dying now, quarrelling and sulking, misled and misunderstanding, vaguely fearful, condemning and thwarting one another in the close darkness of these narrow cults and systems — oh, God! — one wants a gale out of heaven, one wants a great wind from the sea!

If that was true then, it is even truer now.

### § I I

People were beginning to escape, among them a number of those authors who had been most strident in their abuse of Chamberlain’s role at Munich. They now decided, with sparkling suddenness, that they could most gallantly serve the cause of democracy from the fortress of New York. Their excuses were not without humour. They all proclaimed that it was agony to leave. Think of it — they would miss next year’s daffodils at the old cottage (if there *were* any daffodils left, or, for that matter, any old cottage). But they just had to go. Propaganda, you understand. So important. Somebody must tell the Americans the truth. There were people with lovely villas in Palm Beach who did not *realize* how dreadfully close the war was. They must be told. Yes — at all costs they must

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be told, even if it meant that they themselves would have to spend the war lying on some dreadful marble terrace in the *glare* of the Florida sun, while all we lucky people at home were having the excitement of the bombs in the *tingle* of the British winter.

In an odd sort of way I had a sneaking admiration for these people. It takes guts to announce to the world that you are a rat. I hadn't that sort of guts; I couldn't have faced the contempt of my friends when I came back. Besides, though I was just as frightened as anybody, I was excited too. My favourite seat in the theatre has always been the middle of the front row of the stalls, where you can see the grease paint and where the bow of the first violin almost reaches over the brass rail to poke you in the eye. The spotlight of history was drifting slowly, remorselessly, on to our little island. And I shouldn't have liked to watch the Greatest and Most Stupendous Melodrama of All the Ages from the back of the gallery — or rather, over the radio, cowering in a cellar. It would have seemed to me somewhat lacking in chic.

All the same, I longed for a last taste of sun and strange seas and islands looming out of the mist at dawn. So one night in the last days of 1938 I found myself at Dover, drinking quantities of rum in a howling snowstorm, waiting for the arrival from Hamburg of the German passenger-cargo boat, s.s. *Cordillera*, bound for the Caribbean Islands and Mexico.

With me were three ideal companions — of whom one was Osbert Sitwell.

### § III

I don't think that the world has yet quite realized the full stature of the Sitwells. Admittedly, the jeers that greeted the brilliant pyrotechnic display of their youth have echoed into silence. The squibs didn't fizzle out, as had been foretold: the rockets that had soared with such a hiss of sparks into the literary firmament didn't fade into the darkness; the stars of gold and carmine and silver remained fixed, luminous, for our

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delight. Even so, this immortal trio is not justly measured. The deathless beauty of Edith's verse is not yet a part of our national heritage, as one day it will be. The extraordinary genius of Sacheverell is too much taken for granted. And even the laurels that have been tossed to Osbert, one feels, have sometimes been cut from the back of the hedge. Maybe it is just as well — at any rate in Osbert's case. For Osbert thrives on controversy: if he had been French his engagement pad would have been spattered with dates for duels.

It was a lovely trip, and as the weather grew warmer we used to stroll up and down the deck, late at night, under a sky so rich and close that sometimes one had the sense of being overhung by curtains of purple plush, star-spangled, as though this were a pantomime and we were pacing the stage beneath a setting for the boudoir of the Queen of the Night. Pattering after us in the distance, like a hot spaniel, there often followed a tiny German-Jewish professor, who was anxious to engage Osbert in an argument about the Future of English Literature — a subject on which both held large but somewhat divergent views.

Osbert was more than his match. Before the professor had time to launch into his argument he would seize him by the arm, drag him to the ship's rail, and point, with a sweeping gesture, to the Great Bear.

'Arcturus!' he would say. 'That is Arcturus! And over there . . .' (pointing vaguely in the direction of Orion's belt) . . . 'is the Girdle of Hercules. If we follow it due south . . .' (pointing sharply to the north) ' . . . we come to the Sandal of Venus — you can see it quite clearly — and over there . . .' (another sweep that almost knocked the professor down) ' . . . is the Cup of Ganymede. You must study the stars, professor, you must study the stars!'

After a few such lessons in Sitwellian astronomy the professor gave it up.

In view of the rich panorama of memory which Osbert has since unrolled for the world's delight — a panorama where, though every detail has a jewelled perfection, the sweep of the main design is superbly assured — it is amusing to recall that

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at this period he was in search of 'a subject'. The fountain of inspiration was playing without design, the overflow was being lost in the sands. This is, for all artists, the time of crucifixion; no hours are more agonizing than those in which, although the heart throbs quickly, the nerves are all alert and every sense is responsive, the medium does not present itself.

I suggested that he should write a life of Poe. More than any man he is qualified for that exciting task. Himself, in spirit, has penetrated the wild, weeping avenues of Ulalume — and in his pen he has just the curious inks with which to etch the sombre wings of *The Raven*. More, in the grotesque, provincial society of mid-Victorian America he would be in his element, or rather, completely out of it, which, for the artist, is the same thing. Only he could go into that crowd — that terrifying crowd that was a blend of Cruikshank and du Maurier — and catch the echo of its hisses and its laughter.

The idea appealed to him, but he did not write the book. Like most of us at that time, the rising wind from the east seemed to be blowing his manuscripts from his very hands.

### § I V

The ship steamed south. But even here, under a blue sky, with a sea as smooth as a sheet of gun-metal, there was tragedy.

I have not mentioned that we had on board the ship — whose crew was, of course, entirely Nazi — about three hundred German-Jewish refugees. Most of them were travelling steerage, but there were about forty in the first class, with whom I quickly made friends. They were charming people, and it did one's heart good to see the way in which they expanded, little by little, as each day the ship increased the distance between them and the homeland which had rejected them. When they had first come on board they had spoken in whispers, and had stood aside in the passage as though one were going to hit them. They had endured unspeakable things at home, and in order to escape, even the well-to-do had been obliged to leave everything behind them, though one or two still clung to a few pitiable

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possessions — a ring, or a little brooch, or a camera, which they hoped to be able to sell when they landed.

Gradually they thawed, came out on deck, began to smile. Some of them even ventured into the swimming pool — very diffidently at first, as though they were afraid of being turned out again, and then more boldly, splashing about and laughing and joking. It was good to witness the renaissance of these people. Which made what now happened all the more appalling.

One day, the ship's captain, who seemed a decent fellow, with little of the Nazi about him, came up to me and said, in a quiet voice: 'Can you spare me a few moments? I want your advice.'

He led me to his cabin and closed the door.

'It's about these Jews,' he said.

'What about them?' I spoke brusquely because I had a suspicion that he was about to launch into an anti-Semitic argument.

'We've just received a cable saying that about half of them won't be allowed to land.'

'But why not? Surely they've been tortured long enough?'

'It's nothing to do with our government. It's the Mexicans. They've suddenly changed their immigration laws, while we've been at sea.'

'But what on earth will happen to them? Can they go to any other country?'

'Not a hope. Nobody wants them.'

'Couldn't they be smuggled ashore?'

'A hundred and fifty of them? With babies and luggage and no money?'

'Then what . . . ?'

'We'll have to take them back to Germany.'

'Oh, but that's impossible!' I cried. 'Utterly impossible! It would be the most unspeakable cruelty.' I recollected that I was speaking to a Nazi. 'I'm sorry, but . . . but you must see what I mean.'

'Of course I see. I'm not a fool. And I'm not completely



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without a heart. You needn't think we all approve of what's going on at home. All the same, what can I *do*? Most of the officers are orthodox Nazis. They can hardly be civil to the Jews. It makes their blood boil to see our waiters serving such people at table. They'd be only too delighted to take them home again to whatever's coming to them.'

I felt sick at heart. 'Why did you come to me about this?'

'I wanted your advice, as an Englishman. I'm in a dilemma. Ought I to tell them now, or ought I to wait till the end of the voyage?'

'Does anybody else know about this?'

'Only the radio officer. And he's bound to secrecy.'

'What do you yourself feel?'

'As an officer I ought to be taking immediate action — sorting them out into groups, cancelling their passports, all that sort of thing.'

'And as a man?'

He shrugged his shoulders. There was a pause. From below we could hear laughter and shouting from the swimming pool.

'They sound very happy,' I said. 'A few days more happiness would mean a lot to them.'

He caught my eye, and suddenly he smiled. He was, as I said, a decent chap. 'You needn't say any more,' he said.

The Jews were not told.

I was ill when we reached the Caribbean. I saw most of those islands through a double veil, the veil of their own mystery and the veil of my own tiresome fevers. Perhaps it was just as well. I understand that the scenes when the Jews were barred from their promised land were not calculated to improve one's opinion of human nature.

The next few weeks were a long nightmare, in which the virtues of the shifting scene were dependent on the temperature chart — 101 in Panama City — (better stay in bed, it's a pretty poisonous place that ought to have a red light right over the centre of the city) — up to 103 in that odd little coast town Azuera, where they took me in an ambulance — (maybe that's why I got such funny ideas about the vultures who used to sit

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on the tree outside my window; all their wings seemed red) — down to 100 in Havana where they carried me at length, and then — whoopee! — down to normal, back to land, and up to Mexico City. And for a month I was very near to heaven. Here in Mexico were a thousand monuments of beauty which, unlike their counterparts in Europe, were not lying in the shadow of destruction. In the cathedrals one could let one's eyes feast on the richly stained windows of blue and crimson without seeing, in imagination, the swarm of workmen who — as at Chartres — would shortly be stripping the glass from its frames, leaving empty sockets to stare at the threatening skies. Here the skies were bland and peaceful, the glass would remain. Probably only a European would feel this special excitement at the thought of *permanence* — an American would not understand it. Moreover, in Mexico, eight thousand feet up on those soaring plateaux, the air is so dry and sparkling that here it is possible to see early Spanish baroque architecture in almost its original condition. It is as though the churches had been preserved in a casket of cellophane, with the gilding on the frescoes freshly minted, the blues still in their midday glory, the crimsons as fresh as blood newly spilt.

And so the days sped by and I soaked myself in peace and sunshine and beauty, as a cat soaks itself in sunshine. Then one morning I felt I'd had enough. I don't know what decided me — something about Hitler, maybe, over the radio. Or some gossip paragraph about the latest British rustic novelist who had sold his cottage and hoisted the flag of defiance in Arizona. Whatever it was, I went through the usual shambles of packing, caught a train by seconds, spent a hectic forty-eight hours in New York, and a week later was running out into the little garden at Hampstead to see if there was any red showing through the frost-bitten buds of the camellias.

## A MIRACLE AND A MASQUE

I NOW proceeded to engage in a considerable folly. Under the darkening skies of London, some six months before the war, at infinite trouble and expense, I proceeded to erect a bubble of glass. Or rather, to put the last delicate finishing touches to that bubble, in preparation for the storm that was about to break.

The glass was the curved dome of the conservatory at the bottom of my garden. It was, indeed, the *raison d'être* of the whole affair. It gave to the tiny plot a certain balance and purpose and — as you may agree if you study its photograph<sup>1</sup> — something of elegance.

While everybody else was busy digging trenches, or queueing for gas-masks, I was rushing about in a frenzy trying to find leaden boxes of the right shape to place at the base of the dome, to be filled in the summer — if summer ever came — with ivy geraniums. The effect, I calculated, would be startlingly like a gigantic reproduction of one of Queen Mary's hats, to which I have always been partial. It would be comforting, when the Germans were marching through Kent, to look out of the window and gaze on one of Queen Mary's hats, a hundred times life-size and twice as natural.

In case this sounds too boringly *poseur*, I may add that I did try to do a few more practical things. I learned first-aid, and spent long hours getting tangled up in bandages. Although, when the war came, I should presumably be employed in some clerical capacity, I tried, rather dimly, to remember how one fixed bayonets. I even practised, in drunken moments, with an umbrella in the hall. Whatever one's job it was pretty certain that we should all be 'in it'. They would be calling up everybody under forty, and thank God I hadn't sunk so low as forty yet. Or had I? It was difficult to remember one's age in those days, difficult to remember anything at all.

<sup>1</sup> In *Green Grows the City* (Jonathan Cape, 1939.)

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But the dome, I decided, must go on, must be adorned, flood-lit. I became utterly unreasonable about it. It should be a silver bubble of defiance, blown to the swelling, cracking cheeks of Mars. It should be a tiny sword drawn against the curdling dark. It should be a petal in the gale, a fragrance in the stench — it should be any damned cheap metaphor you like, but it should go on. It meant all that to me. Probably it meant the only thing that is worthwhile about me, which is an urgent desire to defend certain small and beautiful things against the mass ugliness and beastliness of the herd.

### § I I

May . . . June . . . July. It was getting very close now. The dome would soon be called upon to prove its mettle. It used to look very beautiful on moonlit nights, in that last summer, rising out of a froth of pink flowers, with one side painted silver and the other side in the shadows.

I decided to have one last look at Europe. After the Anglo-Polish pact the war was as good as here. It needed no great knowledge of history to realize that Hitler would wait till the harvest was in. The fireworks would therefore begin about the middle of September.

That gave me eight weeks. Where should I go? Vienna? No. It would be unbearable, with the swastikas hanging outside the Stefanskirche. Venice? To enter Venice was always to step through a magic doorway, to draw a veil of quiet between oneself and the world. But even in Venice, at this hour, the brass bands of Fascist youth would probably be marching up and down the Piazza. Where *was* there? It is almost amusing to recall the dismay with which one asked that question in 1939, when by comparison with today, so large a proportion of Europe was still open to the traveller.

Then I thought to myself: 'This is an hour when only a miracle can save the world. I will go to the city of Miracles. I will go to Lourdes.'

It was not till late in August that at last I found myself

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standing before the candle-lit shrine of Sainte Bernadette. There was not much time to spare. But I thank God for the little time there was.

### § III

If all the world's leaders could have gone to Lourdes, in the dying fall of that last golden summer, I think there would have been no war. If they could have joined the vast throngs that had come from all over the world, and heard the songs of faith that rang through the city all night long, as the pilgrims marched to the central jewel of the grotto, it is inconceivable that their hands would not have stayed their swords.

Even before I had seen any miracle, even before the first night had fallen, I felt that this was a city in which anything might happen. I arrived at dawn. As the car crested the top of the hill the sun came out, gilding the roofs of the old grey houses and painting the grey river with streaks of silver. I turned off the engine of the car, and let it glide down of its own volition. It was delightful to drift like this, past gardens heavy with morning mist, through narrow cobbled streets, out into the great square by the Cathedral.

After breakfast I went out to prowl around. At every moment my spirits mounted. For here was a city built, quite literally, on faith. It shone from every shop window, from every placard; it was inextricably entangled in the most humdrum affairs of the community. Some people who go to Lourdes are shocked by the 'commercialism' of it all; they purse thin lips before the shops full of sacred novelties, and frown in disapproval at the comfortable hotels which have been built to accommodate the pilgrims. I do not share this disapproval; after all, wherever Jesus went the innkeepers must have done a roaring business and the pedlars' trays must soon have been emptied. There is something warm and comforting in those winding streets where in every shop there is an odour of sanctity. Even the confectioners paint their boxes of bon-bons with scenes from the Nativity, and in the windows of the jewellers you may buy an

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alarm clock in which the Virgin rings the bell. When the children press their noses against the glass of the toyshops their rapturous gaze is fixed, not on dolls nor trains nor soldiers, but on tiny saints that bow and strut by clockwork. One such toy in particular delighted me: it was a singularly hideous group in *papier mâché* of St. Francis and the birds, and every few moments a mechanical device fluttered the wings of the largest bird while at the same time the eyes of Saint Francis were illuminated with electric light.

To some this would be repulsive, to me it was engaging; it had the same appeal as the churches in Naples, where some old peasant woman will wander in to light a candle and say a prayer, followed by her cat, which rubs round her knees while she prays, and even licks its face at the feet of a statue to Our Lady.

### § I V

Do miracles happen at Lourdes? It is difficult to see how any man who studies the evidence can fail to answer 'Yes'. Granted any amount of wishful thinking and hysteria, granted, even, any amount of actual falsification by the vested interests — if you choose to call them such — of the Church, there remains a mass of evidence which cannot be faked. The official records are contained in *Les Miracles de Sainte Bernadette*, by l'Abbé Perigord; at first sight it is a stodgy volume, copiously illustrated with medical diagrams and X-ray photographs. But any man who takes the pains to read it, to check the evidence and examine the credentials of the medical witnesses will find himself following the example of those witnesses themselves; having come to scoff he will remain to pray.

I had not come to scoff; I had come to see if I could gain, as it were, some reserves of strength to carry me through the years of stress that lay ahead. I think I found them. Of all the nights of beauty that I have ever known, none will ever equal the beauty of the night when I joined the throng of pilgrims who paraded the city, in the gathering darkness, singing songs and

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carrying tapers. Those tapers formed a chain of flickering gold, a mile long: the sky was wearing all her stars; but the brightest light of all came from the Grotto of Sainte Bernadette, blazing with a thousand candles, to which we were wending our way. One walked in a dream, yet it was a dream in which all the senses were curiously alert: to this day I can remember individual faces in the crowd, the ecstasy in the eyes of a young German, the smile of ineffable happiness on the thick lips of a Negro. At last, when all the multitude were gathered together, when all the nations were blended in a great mass that stretched to the far distance, there was silence. Never have I heard anything so beautiful as that silence. Nor is that a contradiction in terms, for true silence, the silence of the spirit, is not negative; it is no more a mere absence of noise than darkness is a mere absence of light. Rather is it a harmony of all gentle sounds, a gathering of whispers, a sweet symphony of rest.

So the nations prayed at the grotto that night.

A few weeks later they were at each other's throats.

### § v

From Lourdes I went on to Cannes. That is an ugly sentence, and it was an ugly thing to do, but there was no alternative. Now I come to think of it, it was rather typical of my life, in which the sacred and the profane have been so often, and so sharply, jostled.

But I had to go to Cannes; the war was less than a week away and the general chaos was almost upon us. Besides, there was a friend waiting for me who was sick, and another with a broken car; and there was a tiny villa that I had rashly promised somebody to shut up in case things came to the worst — ('in case'!) — there were all sorts of tiresome affairs which I would have preferred to forget. It would have been much easier to turn the car to the north, and to drive slowly home, through the lovely fields of France, watching the red earth of the vineyards fading, mile by mile, till they gave way to the yellow fields of wheat, saying goodbye to the silver of the olive trees, greeting

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the first green of the pillared poplars, savouring, maybe for the last time, that most colourful of all pleasures, a tour through the fairest country in the world.

But it was not to be. I had to leave the city of miracles, though I like to believe that some small part of me stayed there, and always will.

Cannes was a nightmare. One had the sense of an earthquake suddenly scattering a carnival. As far as I remember, the weather was halcyon, with the sky of the usual shade of enamel, and the ripples plashing as politely as ever on the well-groomed beach; and yet — doubtless because the real and the imaginary were being so swiftly blended into one common nightmare — I seem to recall high winds, thin skirts fluttering madly, beach parasols toppling over in confusion, and a general background of dark. It was like a modern version of those jumbled allegorical pictures which delighted the Victorians, in which hordes of figures in whiskers or crinolines were swept over cliffs on the day of judgment, while a few of the righteous drifted, with expressions of ineffable superiority, towards heaven — usually in the top right-hand corner.

The centre of the maelstrom was the great terrace outside the Carlton Hotel; on the night that I arrived it was packed with the world's playboys and playgirls, running round in circles, spreading fantastic rumours. All night long cars were being loaded up, and into them would tumble women still clad in beach pyjamas, clutching cans of petrol, bottles of petrol, even biscuit tins of petrol, which splashed over them as they roared away to the north. Ambulances flashed by with invalids, dragged hastily from their beds. Every hour some fresh blow to the world of pleasure was announced — the band had been called up, the last of the floor waiters had gone, the restaurant would be closing down. And all the time, in what appeared to be a constant stream, there came the tramp, tramp of soldiers' feet on the promenade — the army on its way to man the Italian frontier.

In this madness I had my own personal worries: my sick friend had disappeared, and the affairs of the villa, which I



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had promised to 'straighten up', were in a state of confusion, rendered all the more aggravating by the advanced hysteria of the lawyer who had charge of them. I only mention these trivial details in order to explain why I did not rush home with the rest.

Forty-eight hours before war was declared I came back to the Carlton after a day of fruitless wrangling, took a seat on the now almost empty terrace, and ordered a drink, trying to give an imitation of a stoical English gentleman. Suddenly I saw Eric Sawyer and Barry Dierks walking quickly to their car in company with a French officer. (The reader may remember that they were the two young architects whom we first met when they were building the Château d'Horizon.) I hurried over to them. 'I want to ask a favour,' I said.

'Oh Lord! — you're not stranded, too?'

'Not at all. I just want to know if I can run out to your villa and put a coin in the pool.'

Eric stared at me for a moment and then burst out laughing. 'Beverley — you're a sentimental old ass.'

'Have you only just discovered that?'

But Barry was not laughing. 'Of course he must go,' he said gravely. 'It always works. We can't come with you, but somebody will let you in.'

So I jumped into the car and sped through the twilight along the ten miles of coast road to Miramar.

The 'coin in the pool' needs a word of explanation. On the terrace of the Villa Trident, which is perched high over the sea like the nest of a gull, there is a small well, sunk into the tiles, with a tiny fountain whose trickle never ceases. At first sight it seems just an ordinary pool, but if you bend over it you will see that the bottom is covered with layers of coins, copper and silver, with here and there a hint of gold. For when the villa was built, years ago, Eric had laughingly invented a legend that anybody who threw a coin into the pool would always return. A grim touch of authenticity was given to the legend when, soon afterwards, a boy who had refused to throw in his coin was killed in a car crash the same night.

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It was nearly dark when I reached the villa. A servant let me in and I walked out to the terrace. Never had the view seemed more entrancing; the mountains were a rhapsody in blue, and in the distance the lights of Cannes were beginning to sparkle. The warm air was heavy with the scent of roses. I stood there, looking down at the pool; the coins seemed to wink at me through the water. I drew from my pocket a handful of loose change, the sort of rubbish one always collects in travel; there were numbers of franc and two-franc pieces, one or two American quarters, and an old Victorian shilling. It was very worn, but it was still bright. I murmured, 'Goodbye and good luck,' and dropped it in. There was a flash of silver, and then I turned away.

In the years to come blood was to run into that pool; and to the trickle of the fountain were to echo the whispers of some of the bravest men of the Resistance, planning schemes which played no small part in the liberation. I could guess none of that; all that I knew was that one day I wanted to return.

One day I did; but that is another story.

### § V I

An hour later I was back in Cannes. And now almost all of them had gone; the terrace was like a marble desert; one had an uncanny feeling of being the last passenger left on a sinking ship.

Then, over in a corner, smoking a cigarette and staring out to sea, I saw a figure who might have been specially placed there by some theatrical director with a superb sense of casting. It was Elsa Maxwell — whom for years the gossip-writers of America and Europe had saluted as the Queen of Pleasure — Elsa, who was always giving, or about to give, the most stupendous party of all time — Elsa, who had done more than any other living woman to brighten the lives of the rich. That is, of course, the popular version of Elsa; it is only a very small part of the truth. For Elsa is also a woman of masculine intelligence and superlative courage, who put up a tireless fight for

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Britain in the war, at a time when we were sorely in need of friends.

'Come up to my villa and dine,' said Elsa. 'It may be the last time I can ever ask you.'

There were eight of us. I cannot remember who the others were; all I can recall is that they were what one would call 'cosmopolitans'. Elsa's villa was high up in the hills; and after dinner we sat looking out over the bay, whose beauty is always made so much more spectacular by the diamond chains of light that fringe the shore; it always reminds me of a picture set in a baroque frame of brilliants.

Suddenly the lights went out. The bay receded into darkness. The glittering fringe of civilization had been wrenched away.

'I wonder,' said Elsa, 'how long it will be before the lights will go on again.'

I wonder, too, what we should have thought, if we had known that it would be six years.

We sat there, talking in the darkness, and the echoes of our conversation, as I recall them, seem to drift down a corridor of immense length, that is thick with the dust of an age that has gone.

Do you remember Max Reinhardt's parties at Salzburg? What will happen to that lovely city? Shall we have to bomb it? Do you think they've moved all the pictures from the Louvre? And is it true that Eddie Molyneux is somewhere in Biarritz, hiding his Cézannes and his Dégas and his Sisleys? What will Noel do? Propaganda, I suppose; whatever it is, it's sure to be something spectacular. Will Ivor Novello be asked to write another 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'? Oh, no! — it would be ironical to the point of cruelty; besides, for all one knew, the home fires *were* already burning, burning down to the ground.

Do you remember the Lido? And the parties at Constance Toulmin's palazzo on the Grand Canal? Would Italy come in? If so, should we have to bomb Venice? But mankind had gone mad — it was a red beast running amok. Why did not the Pope do something? Why didn't he at least *say* something?

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What would the Labour people do now? And Oswald Mosley — would they shut him up? At any rate we had all the Jews on our side — or had we? Some of the Communists were Jews. If the Germans got together with the Russians — but no, that didn't bear thinking of.

Do you remember Budapest? And the little bar where one went to drink Tokay at six o'clock — and plunging into the Danube after a hot sulphur bath? Would they use gas? What about old ladies in gas-masks, and babies — what about animals?

The grim and the trivial were mingled in hopeless confusion. If Italy came in, did that mean that the Ivy Restaurant would have to close down? Why hadn't we been nicer to that beastly Edda Ciano when she was in London? Everybody had snubbed her, nobody would go to her parties; she'd probably given Mussolini the foulest report about us.

Do you remember Le Touquet, and Syrie Maugham's villa and the Dolly Sisters eating cheese cakes with old Selfridge at that little restaurant with the striped parasols? Which reminded one — supposing the Germans got the Channel ports. Could the French be trusted? What about Laval? Supposing. . . .

Oh, stop supposing. It was no use. There was nothing to be done except to take what was coming to one. It was lucky that few of us knew quite how much that was going to be.

## § VII

And there, perhaps, this book should come to a stop, with a group of people sitting on a terrace under the moonlight, waiting for the stars to fall. Spoilt people, you may say, who had been star-gazing too long and too exclusively — and maybe you will be right. But most of them, I think, had earned their pleasures in a hard school, and most of them had certain standards of taste and judgment whose loss the world may one day regret.

Before we close these pages, however, perhaps you will ride by my side, for the last time, as we journey home. It will not be

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a very comfortable journey, though God knows that it is luxurious enough in comparison with the plight of tens of thousands in those first ten days of war. We are not quite sure where we are going, though we hope to cross the Belgian frontier; Belgium is still neutral and from there it will be easier to get a boat to England.

Anyway, we start off. I have a high fever, for some unknown reason, and the long straight roads seem to be twisting up and down. It is all rather eerie, in the gathering dusk, for we are the only people going north, against a vast, never-ending stream of troops, filing down the dusty roads towards the Italian frontier.

Don't look at those troops too carefully: they won't encourage you; they are weary, slouching, ill-equipped, ill-disciplined, and across the face of every man is written 'Je m'en fiche'. It is less an army than a rabble; one feels that it would be scattered far and wide by the very sight of the Reichswehr. Is it my fever, or are they really riding in those flimsy limousines, which still bear the names of Parisian dressmakers? Is it all a dream, or are those lorries really half filled with prostitutes, waving bottles of wine in the faces of giant negroes — like some weird parody of a painting by Goya? No. It isn't a dream. It is really happening. *C'est la guerre.*

They cling round the car, these soldiers, imploring cigarettes. They clamber up on the running board, waving their antiquated rifles in our faces. They want to prove to us how hopeless it all is. 'Voilà monsieur — you could not shoot a crow with that — *c'est pour les courbeaux, ça!*'

And so we go on, somewhere to the north, with this stage army of despair surging steadily, remorselessly, towards us, striped by the shadows of the poplars.

### § VIII

Here is a clear stretch. The road is empty again — a long sweep of silver, that seems, as do so many roads in France, to be about to dance up to the skies.

I want to do some thinking aloud. If you had been sitting

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beside me, on that journey, you would have heard a fairly exhaustive commentary on the title of this book.

‘All I could never be.’

I began, I remember, with music. I thought of all the music I had never learned — the stacks of volumes piled up on the piano, their pages dog-eared, their difficult passages overscored with fingering marks which dated back, in some cases, for nearly twenty years. There was Chopin’s Third Scherzo in E minor; I had very nearly mastered that, once. Of all compositions for the piano it is perhaps the most fierily romantic, with its shimmering double arpeggios which flutter down, like spray, on to the grim, dark, rock-like chords below. And the César Franck Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, and the Schumann Concerto, and the Bach Italian Concerto, and the Brahms Intermezzi — one had been so near to them all, but had never quite got them to concert pitch. Some shadow had always fallen across the keyboard, calling one away — even if it was only the shadow of a spray of white lilac, demanding attention and adoration.

But why was one thinking of music when the world had chosen discord? What was the sense of thinking of anything decent at all?

Here is the army again, breasting that hill in the distance, crawling towards us like a long dusty dragon — a dragon that has already tasted defeat. We speed on, meet the advance guard in a village; we are held up, papers are demanded; ça va; we are waved on again — and once more, we catch a glimpse of the limousines and the black troops and the prostitutes, looking more garish than ever in the first light of dawn.

I can think aloud again; I can even laugh aloud. This is a pretty end to *Cry Havoc!* This is indeed an elegant conclusion to those years of endeavour when I had actually had the impudence to imagine that I could light a torch which would bring a new message to the world. Where had it all led to? To a nightmare road in France, choked with men marching once again to the slaughter — and this time, without even a song on their lips.

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Had every cause I had ever fought for been equally futile? It looked like it. Once I had thought that I could make other people turn, from time to time, to the Gospel according to St. Mark. I had thought that one man's prayer might lead to another man's prayer, till at last there was a great chorus, that would reach like a pillar of light to the stars. Was that just arrogance — just a sort of cheap evangelism, with its roots in some nasty sort of Freudian complex? Again, it looked like it, just now, on this grey road over which I was speeding.

### § I X

I crossed the Belgian frontier at about noon on the following day. I don't recall the details, because my fever was now past a joke. All I knew was that now, in a day or two, I could be sure of getting home.

By the side of the road, just over the border, there was a wayside shrine. I went and sat down beside it. It was all very quiet. Belgium was still at peace. It was an odd feeling — at peace. Although the war was barely a week old, I seemed to have been, personally, at war all my life.

There was no sound except the trickle of water from a fountain near the figure of our Lord. I went over and had a drink. That was better. Then I sat down again, by the side of the road, racking my brains to try to think, for the last time, of some reason that might possibly justify my existence.

And then, as I stared into the dust, I remembered something. It was a very slight incident, but it made me feel better. It had happened after a visit to Turkey, some years before. I had intended to stay in Istanbul for some weeks, as I had been commissioned to write an introduction to a book on Byzantine architecture, but I fled from the city after three days, driven away by the appalling cruelty to animals which was evident at every street corner — horses that should have been shot in simple mercy, blinded birds in tiny cages, dogs and cats — but you can imagine the rest. I did at least try to do something about it, but there seemed no organization, nor the faintest

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shadow of interest from any of the people I approached. After a lot of fruitless wrangling, and a silly sort of fight in the street, I got on the boat to Constanza, feeling very shabby and contemptible, as though I was running away from a battle, as indeed I was.

I couldn't forget those animals; they kept coming into my conversation at the most inappropriate moments; they haunted my dreams. All my life I have felt that the core of sin is cruelty, that it is the only true test of what is good or evil. Many things which the world approves have seemed to me unbearably cruel, and these I have attacked; many things which the world deplores have seemed to me right and proper, for I could see no cruelty in them, and these I have defended. If there is any of the golden thread of continuity in my life, it is here.

These animals eventually found their way into a book,<sup>1</sup> for the only weapon with which I could fight for them was my pen. It had seemed, at the time, a futile enough instrument, but for once in a way it was not. A few weeks after the book was published, a letter had arrived from Istanbul. It came from a tiny society which had been formed by a few gallant Americans to fight for the animals; but its members were poor and practically powerless. And then — the letter told me — out of the blue had come funds from California, more than they had ever dared to dream of. Some old lady had read my book — and now, they could carry on.

So perhaps — I had thought then — my pen is not so futile after all. It scratches and scratches, pecking up a lot of dust and rubbish, but now and then it may unearth a speck of gold. I had forgotten this over the years, in the protracted agony of witnessing the destruction of everything that one had loved and cherished. But now, sitting by that wayside shrine, I remembered it.

I said to myself: 'Perhaps, because one has lived, some dog has found a home, some bird has been set free, some kitten has been stroked.'

It was not very much, but it was better than nothing at all.

<sup>1</sup> *No Place Like Home* (Jonathan Cape, 1936).











